

## THE BLANKET

This is the story of Lepotane, the son of a Basuto chief, who becomes innocently involved in a ritual murder. The killing goes wrong and at the resulting trial Lepotane turns King's Evidence without understanding what he is doing. When his father and friends are sentenced to death, he is allowed to go free and return to his village. He reaches home with two burdens: that of guilt and shame for having, so he thinks, betrayed his father, and that of a new understanding of the consequences of cruelty and violence. The crux of the story lies in his choice. Will he accept the role of traitor, as he appears according to the beliefs of his people, or will he take up that of leader and reformer? It is a dramatic story, full of excitement and suspense, and A. A. Murray's knowledge of Basutoland gives it great authority.

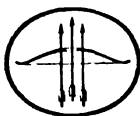


A. A. MURRAY

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# THE BLANKET

*A Novel*



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**TO BOB**



## CHAPTER I

Lepotane reached behind him to the pile of dry brushwood and threw another branch onto the fire. It spurted up with a crackling sound and a show of red sparks, lighting momentarily the blackened roof of the cave, the pale, restless forms of the sheep, and the dark, high-cheekboned profile of Simpi, his brother. With a short, charred stick he cautiously lifted the lid of the three-legged iron pot which straddled the flames.

‘It boils,’ he said. ‘Soon we shall eat.’

In the red light he saw the gleam of Simpi’s teeth.

‘You are a fine cook, Lepotane. You really have no need of Mamolai.’

‘Cooking is women’s work.’

‘True enough. And some day you shall have your Mamolai. But put her from your mind for the moment for, when a herd dreams of love, the porridge burns and the sheep are stolen from under his nose.’

‘Did the herds of Musa dream of love while you and Maburu went off with these, the finest of his flock?’

•Lepotane jerked his head towards the sheep at the back of the cave.

‘You are light-headed, young brother. Who speaks of Musa’s herds? Were we not quietly tending our own flock at the cattle post at the very time that the theft took place? We have our witness, Thebe. He

knows that we never left the cattle post. Besides, where are the markings of Musa? The little half-moons clipped from the tip of the ear? These sheep have curiously short ears, I grant you, but you will not find the mark of Musa among them.'

Lepotane smiled. 'They are restless,' he said.

'They need food and water. Soon the moon will climb above the Eastern mountain and we will drive them down to the stream. We can let them graze for some hours. When it begins to lighten we must bring them back and block up the gateway again. This way they will be all right for a number of days.'

'And after that?'

'We will drive them to the caves on the other side of the valley. It will be as well to keep them moving for a time.'

'You have done this sort of thing before?'

'Many times.'

'Have you never been afraid?'

'Afraid of what?'

'The solitude—the police—these things make one uneasy.'

'When you have been at a cattle post since you were a small boy, solitude becomes an old friend. As for the police, well, they are useful for tracing one's stock when they have been stolen. I have no quarrel with the police.'

Lepotane looked at his brother with the wide eyes of admiration.

'You will make a fine chief when our father dies,' he said. 'I who am but the son of the second hut will be glad to serve you. I have noticed that little men are inclined to boast and make a big noise and grow drunk and quarrelsome. But you are always thus. Smiling, teasing, modest, but with a suggestion of power deep within you, so that, even when I speak to my dear and familiar brother, I am aware that I speak also to my chief.'

Simpi laughed and, leaning over, he touched Lepotane lightly on the wrist.

'First your brother,' he said. 'But let these things remain unsaid. There is no need of them. Between us there has always flowed the unspoken language of brothers.'

When they had eaten their stiff porridge of mealie-meal and water, and the thin, half circle of the moon had climbed above the dark outline of the mountains, they drove the sheep down the steep, ziz-zagging path that led to the stream below. Their bleating seemed to swell the silence, to plumb the very depths of their aloneness. There was a strange pulsation in the rushing sound of the water, as though it drank from the little streams that fed it with uneven gulps.

The sheep settled down to grazing on the short, green grass flanking the stream. The two young men sat on a rock and watched them. Presently Lepotane said softly: 'The grain is finished and there is only enough mealie-meal for another three days.'

'You had better ride down to the village in the morning,' Simpi replied.

'I can be back the same night.'

'Don't hurry yourself. Rest down there for a day or two. I can manage alone for a short time. Besides, Mamolai will be looking at the young schoolteacher if you do not remind her from time to time that a fellow named Lepotane is doing a man's work up at the cattle post.'

'You have a good heart, Simpi.'

'But I am wiser than you. I keep my good heart to myself.'

'What about Maiede?'

'She is to be my wife of the first hut. Phiri, our father, has arranged it. It is well known that the second hut holds the true love. My second hut is likely to remain empty for a long time—perhaps for ever.'

'You love no one?'

'No one.'

'Heh! You will fall in love yet. You don't leave the cattle post for long enough to give yourself a chance.'

'Women bring trouble. That is all I know of them.'

'Why do you say that?'

'It is a simple statement.'

'I thought it might be Siloane you had in mind.'

'What is the meaning behind your words, young brother?'

'Last time I went to the village I had a feeling—a sort of uneasiness—I can't describe it exactly.'

‘Speak out, Lepotane.’

‘It is that fellow Maburu. I don’t trust him. I don’t like his manner with Siloane. I am afraid that it is going to bring trouble.’

‘There is no harm in Siloane. She is a fool. But that is so with most women.’

‘She is a great favourite with my father.’

‘Of course. When one pays a big price for a cow one values it accordingly.’

‘She is young and beautiful. That could be a reason too, don’t you think?’

‘When a man feels youth slipping away from him he tries to grapple it to his person in the body of a young wife. Unfortunately the spirit of self-sacrifice is never very strong in young female flesh. Well, Lepotane, let us take comfort. The women who will one day betray us are not yet born.’

‘Then you too think that Siloane will betray our father?’

‘Our father is an old man. Siloane is a young woman. Young, comely and a fool. I do not expect a stream to flow anywhere but in its natural course.’

‘But my father will never submit to such a betrayal. I have seen ice in his eyes when he looks at Maburu. I wish he would dismiss him. I wish that he had never hired him as a herd.’

‘How could he know that Maburu any more than anyone else would be tempted by Siloane? It is a risk he takes every time he hires a young man. And, if he

should dismiss him now, the little sheep here might talk. There is never any simple solution to a matter of this nature. Come. It is time to gather the flock together and take them back to the cave.'

Simpi stood up and stretched himself. Lepotane watched the tall figure of his brother moving slowly across the sward. He was only two years younger than Simpi, but he felt as a child in the presence of a man. A man who looked life in the face and laughed at it. A man; a stock-thief; a chief. His heart swelled with admiration.

Before them, with an undulating flow of movement, the sheep moved back towards the cave. Their feet pricked into the soft earth with the sound of rain.



## CHAPTER II

Dawn came into a clear sky, grey at first, with the little, raw wind of the mountains creeping through the blankets of the two men as they lay side by side, tightly wrapped from head to foot, no part of their bodies showing anywhere. And, with the first light, as at a summons, Lepotane woke, and yawned, and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. Then, still with his blanket round him, he threw sticks into a pile and kindled them with dry grass, and carefully lighted one match from the dilapidated match box that had served them now for more than a month.

The acrid smell of wood smoke filled the cave and the sheep stirred and milled, jostling each other for warmth. The desolation of their bleating drifted out into the morning, thin and blue as the wood smoke, climbing towards a sky that was now as pink and innocent as a sea shell. Then, slowly, like the spreading of a stain, the pink deepened to red until, with a burst of yellow light, blinding and straight-shafted, the sun thrust its head over the crest of the mountains.

Lepotane went to fetch his horse from where, its head hobbled to its foreleg, it was grazing on the mountain side. When he returned, Simpi had made the porridge and they ate and talked and sat a while, stretching their hands to the fire, feeling the warmth

and the smoke seeping into them, into their clothes, their blankets, their very being, so that wherever they went there would be this pungent smell of smoke; lying like another blanket over the acridity of their sweat.

They had planned that Lepotane would leave early, but early was when you were ready to go. There was no urgency, no pressing sense of time. They lived close to the earth, to the rhythm of the earth, unchanging, immutable. Yesterday was but a day like today. And what was today but another tomorrow? Where then lay the sense in hurrying? So they remained in the cave, sitting and talking, until Lepotane rose in leisurely fashion and stretched and walked out slowly to saddle his horse.

His long legs straddled the tiny, brown pony. It leaped forward willingly, nostrils flared, black mane rippling and tossing with every step over the uneven ground. Lepotane looked back once to where Simpi stood at ease, watching him go with careless, affectionate interest.

'*Sala hantle,*' (remain well) he called, and Simpi answered him: '*Tsamaea hantle. Tsamaea ka khotso,*' (Go well. Go in peace), sending his voice out in a call that travelled on and on, echoing down the long, steep-sided valley.

Lepotane carried the empty grain sack over his shoulder. In one hand he held his reins and in the other his *lesiba*. This was a stick about a yard in length with a strand of twisted gut stretched down it and

pegged at one end with an eagle's quill. He had made it when he was quite a small herd boy and it served him equally well to chastise an ox or to supply him with music. From time to time he placed one end to his lips and blew on the quill, producing two notes of curious sweetness that went up and down and up and down like a see-saw. Eea-ooa, eea-ooa.

It cheered him on his way and kept him company. Not that he was conscious of loneliness, any more than he was conscious of the sense of habitation with which crags and mountain face, shadowed gorge and rushing water are strangely imbued. To him, by reason of long familiarity, all around him was home, simple, outward, accepted. He did not see the world of men reflected in the upheaval of earth and stone; could not trace the outlines of castles, fortresses and sky-scrapers, as the white men from the cities must surely have done. Lepotane had never seen a city, or any building much bigger than the little mission church outside his own village. To him, a stream was a place where one's own horse might drink, or where, lying flat on the stomach, one might drink oneself and splash water over the head for refreshment. A mountain was something to be climbed, or descended with care, and grass and trees were pasturage and fuel and shade from the hot sun of summer.

Yet he was not wholly untouched by inward things. In him spiritual awareness took the form of pleasant well-being. It had been a good season. There had been

rain and, in his heart, was peace. *Khotso, pula*. Peace and rain, the slogan of his people. He did not express it so much in conscious thought as in the jaunty, off-key refrain on his *lesiba*. Eea-ooa, eea-ooa.

The evidence of a good season lay all around him. In the dark, glistening streaks of wet rock high on the mountain side, where fountains had burst out of the earth. In the strong flow of the streams he crossed, and in the ripening maize standing high and lush and yellow in the lands past which he rode. A few late cosmos were still blooming, flecking the yellow lands with white and pink and lilac. The little horse was well trained to respect the lands beside the path, but every now and then the temptation would be too much for him and he would stretch out his neck to grab a cob of maize. But always Lepotane was too quick for him. 'Heh! Heh!' he would yell and smack his feet into the horse's flanks and whack him sharply on the side of the neck with the *lesiba*.

The sun had still some hours to go when he saw the grey aloe fences and the red huts of his home village lying below him on the steep mountain side. Much of the sprightliness had gone out of his little horse, but Lepotane encouraged him with a spate of clackifig sounds and they entered the village at an amble. Dogs and children ran out to meet them and a girl sitting on a rock, looked up from her knitting to give him a shy greeting.

'I greet you. How are you?'

‘I am well. I do not know how it is with you, Mamolai.’

‘I am well.’

Her eyes fell again, demurely, to the work in her hands and he stood for a moment simply looking at her, enjoying the visual pleasure that this small, brown girl never failed to give him. She was wearing the white blouse and dark blue tunic worn by such girls of the mission school as could afford more than the cheap, cotton prints sold by the traders. Her feet, clad in low-heeled black shoes with the laces tied in neat little bows, were modestly pressed together. Her firm brown legs gleamed in the sunlight. The back of her round, black head was covered in a little white knitted cap, and a rosary of coloured beads encircled her neck.

He saw a movement in the doorway of his father’s hut and withdrew his eyes from her reluctantly. The tall frame of the old man stooped to pass through the low doorway as he came towards his son. Lepotane saw a look of pleasure pass like a ripple over the thin, hawk’s face. The next instant it had resumed its habitual gravity.

‘I greet you,’ he said.

‘I greet you, my father.’

‘I see you have the empty grain sack. Is all well in the mountains?’

‘All is well and Simpi sends you his greeting.’

‘The women will prepare food for you. Call a herd to fetch your horse.’

He turned and went back into the hut. A small boy, naked except for a loin-cloth, ran forward to take the reins of the horse from Lepotane and led it away. He crossed over to the rock where Mamolai was sitting and stood looking down at her. She pretended to be scarcely aware of his presence, clicking her needles vigorously and singing as she worked, a curious, detached little incantation, high and nasal.

‘Jesu—lover of my soul—’

‘What are you making?’ Lepotane asked.

Mamolai snapped off the thread of her song as cleanly as she was in the habit of snapping a strand of cotton with her strong, white teeth.

‘A cap.’

‘But you have one already.’

‘Then this will do for someone else.’

‘For me, perhaps?’

‘No, not for you, Lepotane.’

‘I love you, Mamolai. I have told you so many times. Aren’t you ever going to love me in return?’

Mamolai said flatly: ‘I am going to be married in a church.’

‘Then I too shall be married in a church.’

‘You are a heathen, Lepotane.’

‘I am a Mosuto.’

‘And I am a Christian.’

‘I say that you too are a Mosuto.’

‘It is not impossible to be both. Many of the Basuto follow the Christian faith.’

'I know them. It seems to me that they stand at the crossing of two roads, not knowing which way they shall follow. A man's belief is in his head and in his heart and in his blood. It is not possible for one to say to him: "Think thus," or "Think thus." A man thinks as he thinks.'

'I think as the Maruti teaches,' Mamolai said with satisfaction. 'And I shall wear a white dress and a white veil for my wedding.'

Lepotane said dreamily, for there was a lethargic warmth in the sunlight: 'Tell me what you believe,' and he threw himself down on the rock beside her. She said in her little clipped voice, imitating the words of the priest: 'That we are God's children and that Jesus, His Son, came to save sinners.'

'Sinners? Wrong-doers? But what is wrong for one may be right for another.'

'There is only one wrong and one right,' Mamolai answered severely, and because he was not used to expressing his thoughts in words, or even his feelings in thought, Lepotane wrinkled up his forehead in grave concentration.

'The Maruti may say: "Act thus, and thus, and no evil will befall you,"' he said, 'but the *Ngaka* (Witch-doctor) will say: "Do such and such, and evil will be averted from your hut." And who shall judge if the teaching of one is better than the teaching of the other, since both spring from somewhere beyond the memory of man and each has learnt the truth after the manner

of his own kind? A beast is a beast and a lion is a lion, and flesh is right for the lion and grass for the ox. And is grass right, or flesh wrong?"

Mamolai looked at him accusingly.

'You are an unbeliever,' she said and she drew her skirts a little away from where he sat beside her on the rock. 'I will never marry an unbeliever.'

After a pause, Lepotane said sheepishly: "Then there is nothing for it. I shall have to become a Christian. After all, I like the singing in the church."

Her face lit up and her white teeth shone in a wide smile.

"That would please me, Lepotane. And the Maruti would rejoice that a sinner had been called to repentance."

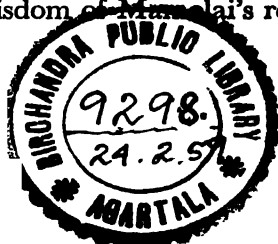
'Am I a sinner?' Lepotane asked, very much surprised.

'We are all sinners,' Mamolai said dolefully.

'Do you really understand what you are talking about?' Lepotane asked, the creases on his forehead tightening with mental effort.

'Of course,' she said with a superior air. 'You forget that I am a standard six scholar. Things are plain to me that must often seem very puzzling to a simple fellow like you.'

Up to this moment he had been conscious of the superiority of his manhood, feeling a sort of indulgence towards this dear and foolish girl. But now he was ill at ease. He might doubt the wisdom of Mamolai's re-





ligion, but her learning he regarded with awe. He had nothing to throw into the scales against it and it filled him with doubt of himself and the significance of his tribal customs and beliefs. Therefore he said lightly: 'Ah, yes. Learning. That is something I would like to have. The little scratchings that mean something. I did attend school. For a short time. Many years ago. I learnt how to make and recognise scratchings up to the number twenty. But then my father sent me to the cattle post to look after his sheep. I was glad to escape. It was all very confusing at the school. My head was stiff. It did not take in the little scratchings with ease. But now I feel that I would like to hear of the thoughts of others in these books; to learn what the world is like beyond the village and the mountains. Some day you must read to me from your books. It seems to me that they must be full of secret power and strange information. Also, one is not so well thought of if one cannot read the scratchings or understand the language of the white chiefs.'

Though he spoke carelessly, Mamolai was well aware of the humility that had crept upon him. She was quick to press home her advantage, putting on a bored air as if she had had enough of this empty talk. To emphasize her lack of interest she let her eyes roam round the country-side and saw, high up on the bridle path, the figure of a horseman. Her face brightened with interest.

'If you had had some education,' she said, 'you might

have joined the police. They look very fine in their uniform. Just take a look at that fellow on the path. I believe he is coming this way. He is going to pay us a visit.'

Lepotane looked up sharply.

'A policeman? Now what could he be wanting?'

'It is just the usual patrol, I expect. They come every now and again. Sometimes they make camp here.'

Lepotane got quickly to his feet.

'I must call my father,' he said and went towards the *khotla* hut, calling out: '*Ntat'a, Ntat'a.*' (Father, Father.) Phiri came out in answer to the urgency in his son's voice.

'What is it?' he demanded.

'A policeman is approaching.'

Phiri came close to him and spoke in a low voice.

'Be careful of your words and how you conduct yourself. Show no agitation. It may be nothing. On the other hand, he comes from the direction of our cattle post. We shall soon see.'

The policeman, mounted on a fine horse, very different to the little Basuto pony ridden by Lepotane, came clattering in among the huts. Greetings, polite and formal, were exchanged between him and Chief Phiri.

'What brings you this way?' the chief asked casually.

'I come from your cattle post,' the policeman replied.

'You found all well there, I hope?'

'Yes, if it is your habit to leave only the herd, Thebe, in charge.'

Phiri said with dignity: 'As you know, my sons are in charge of the cattle post. But Lepotane has come down for grain and Simpi, he tells me, is away looking for certain of my sheep that have strayed—or been stolen. You know what stock theft is like in the mountains these days.'

'It is strange that you mention stock theft. I have had a complaint from one Musa. It appears he has lost over a hundred sheep. He suspects they have been stolen.'

Phiri's face was as blank as a smooth stone.

'You have come a long way,' he said. 'Musa's village is two days' ride from here. What brought you to my cattle post?'

'I traced the spoor of the sheep to the vicinity of your cattle post. There I lost it. I had hoped to get help from your herds thinking they must surely have seen these sheep. But the lad, Thebe, was alone and he is not very bright. He did not seem to understand my questioning. Nor could he tell me where Simpi and Lepotane were to be found. It seems strange they should have left without telling him why or where they were going.'

'When did you trace these sheep to my cattle post?' Phiri asked.

About four days ago. Yes, last Thursday, to be exact. I picked up the spoor at Musa's kraal and followed it some three days through the mountains.'

'I do not envy you the task. It cannot be easy to trace sheep through the mountains for such a distance. I regret very much that Simpi and Lepotane were not

there to help you. But here is Lepotane. He came down a day or two ago for food. Before that, he was with Simpi, looking for the lost sheep. Lepotane, tell the policeman if you saw anything of these sheep of Musa's. No doubt they were marked. What is the marking of Musa?

The policeman looked at them closely.

'Two small half-moons cut into the tip of the right ear,' he said. 'Strange that Thebe said nothing to me about your sheep being lost.'

'He is mistrustful of strangers,' Lepotane said quickly. 'He is a simple lad. I doubt if he has ever seen a policeman. He would not have wanted you to know that he was alone at the cattle post.'

'And you do not remember seeing these sheep of Musa's?' his father persisted.

Lepotane shook his head.

'No,' he said slowly, 'I saw no such sheep. Perhaps they passed during the night.'

The policeman remained silent for a moment, though he were thinking the matter over.

'Ah, well,' he said cheerfully, 'I must be on my way. You may see me again. I shall be around these parts until the sheep are found.'

'I hope they will be found,' Phiri said quietly.

'They will be. Don't worry.'

'Mosali,' Phiri called to a woman watching from one of the doorways, 'bring beer for the policeman that he may refresh himself before he rides.'

She disappeared into the hut and returned a moment later with a gourd of thin, sour beer which she handed to the policeman. He drank deeply. Then he gave the gourd back to the woman and remounted his horse.

'Peace,' he called to them as he rode away, and they answered together:

'Peace. Go in safety.'

## CHAPTER III

Phiri turned to Lepotane.

'Come into the *khotla* hut,' he said.

His son followed him into the cool gloom of the hut. When the door was closed light came only from one small window scarcely more than a foot square. In the centre of the hut stood a rough, wooden table and empty paraffin cases, pushed back against the wall, served as seats.

'Someone has informed the police,' Phiri said abruptly. 'We have been betrayed.'

'Why do you think that, my father?'

'The policeman said that he followed the spoor last Thursday. Cast your mind back. There was rain throughout the district on Thursday and Friday. There could have been no spoor. This story of his was simply a trap. He hoped that one of us would give himself away by showing knowledge of the sheep. Thebe seems to have played his part well. He is a good boy. But I would give much to learn the identity of the one who has betrayed us.'

The smouldering uneasiness that had been in Lepotane's mind for many weeks, came out with a burst.

'I do not trust Maburu,' he said.

His father regarded him coldly.

'I trust him as my own son,' he said. 'For that reason

I am going to send him on a mission of some importance. This whole matter needs sifting out. I shall require certain information. I plan to hold a *mokete*—a feast—for men speak freely when they are made easy with meat and beer. I shall send Maburu to the cattle post for sheep. He can take the grain to Simpi. I have need of you here. Four nights from now we will hold our feast. Go and call Maburu to me, but say nothing to him of the business of the policeman.'

Maburu was sitting in the sun with his back against the wall of a hut.

'My father sent me to call you to the *khotla*,' Lepotane said, unhappy in his errand yet not knowing the full reason for his uneasiness. Maburu yawned and got lazily to his feet.

'What did that fellow, the policeman, want?' he asked.

'Nothing much. It was just the usual patrol.'

'I'll play you at a game of *marabaraba* as soon as the old man has done with me. By the way, what does he want me for?'

'He wishes to send you on an errand for he trusts you as his own son,' Lepotane said, watching Maburu's face closely. But Maburu only laughed, a careless, insolent laugh, and went off, swaggering, towards the *khotla*.

Lepotane began thoughtfully to arrange some small stones in a rectangular section divided into squares which had been cut into the flat surface of a rock. This

was the *marabaraba* stone and the males of the village, from small herds upwards, would frequently gather around it for a game. In a little while he was joined by Maburu and the two sat on their haunches on either side of the rock. The game began.

Maburu said with a grin: 'I am to go to the cattle post for sheep. There is going to be a feast. About time too. It is a long time since we had any jollification in this village.'

'Your move,' Lepotane said coldly.

Maburu's head lifted as the sound of a bus, labouring up the hill side, broke into the stillness of the afternoon. Then, absently, he made his move.

'You are asleep,' Lepotane said, and moved a small stone here and here and here. Then he scooped up Maburu's stones, gathering them into the palm of his hand. 'The game is over. I have beaten you.'

Maburu had a reputation for playing a cunning game of *marabaraba* when he set his mind to it. But, this afternoon, his mind was not on the game. Lepotane knew the cause of his distraction. Siloane, his step-mother, had gone to the campong to do some shopping. he too had heard the big, red bus labouring its way up the road. He too had seen it stop. He knew that Maburu's eyes had missed his opportunities on the *marabaraba* stone because they were following Siloane as she climbed down from the bus and took a few tottering steps in her high-heeled shoes. At the edge of the road she stooped and removed the shoes. She tied them carefully to the



top of a large bundle which she lifted onto her head. Then with a tripping, swaying gait, she began the descent of the stony path leading to the village. The sun rippled over the tight silk of her dress and gleamed on the copper bracelets jingling on her smooth, brown arms.

'Look out!' Maburu shouted, 'You're losing your shoes.' And she laughed, a huge burst of excited, apprehensive laughter, showing her fine, white teeth.

Lepotane wondered at his father's recent words. Did he indeed trust Maburu as a son? It was as well that he was within the *khotla* at this moment. He would not have liked the manner in which Maburu kept his eyes on Siloane, smiling a little as though the sight of her afforded him some special privileged enjoyment. He remembered his father's face on other occasions when Maburu had seemed to overstep the bounds of discreet behaviour towards her. The puzzled uneasiness which had beset him during his interview with his father returned to him.

Siloane was coming down a path between the aloe fences now. In another moment she paused in front of her own hut and, bending her knees to allow her bundle a safe entrance through the low doorway, she disappeared within.

'I wonder what she has bought at the campong,' Maburu said. 'I wonder what she has got in that bundle.'

'Nothing for you,' Lepotane said shortly. 'Let's have another game.'

They set out the stones again and again. Lepotane won because Maburu's eyes were watching the door of Siloane's hut instead of the moves of his opponent.

Presently she came out and placed a flat stone and a bowl of corn in front of the hut. Then, seating herself with a graceful, sideways folding of her legs, she began grinding handfuls of corn between the flat stone and another smaller stone which she held between her hands. She had taken off her silk dress and wore a blanket swathed about her body and drawn tight under her armpits. Her shoulders and arms were bare and her skin shone with an even deeper lustre than the silk dress as she moved backwards and forwards to the rhythm of her task. Maburu watched her, no longer pretending to take an interest in the game.

A two-year-old child came from one of the huts and staggered towards her on uncertain, chubby legs. A few fowls of assorted plumage and feathery legs, who had been making surreptitious advances on the corn basin, scurried away at his approach. No other sounds disturbed the stillness of this afternoon in early winter, when the sun shone down with the heat of summer and one drifted into the silence and touched the fringe of sleep, until a dog barked or a child called and life in the village broke out once more.

## CHAPTER IV

Lepotane felt the change of atmosphere, the transition from lethargy to tension, even before he looked up and saw his father coming from the *khotla* hut and making his way to where Siloane sat. He saw her present to him a face impassive and closed as she always did when he had occasion to rebuke her. But his father's voice was gentle and friendly.

'Did you buy the blanket?' he asked.

Immediately the sullen expression gave way to relieved, child-like smiles.

'I bought you a nice blanket,' she cried, 'the finest in the campong. And I can tell you that I didn't take the first one they showed me, nor did I buy from the first shop I entered. I went to all four of them and then I returned to the second, for that was where I had seen ~~this blanket~~—the finest of them all.'

She sprang up and ran into her hut, returning with the bundle in her arms. She claved at the brown paper in her haste to get at the contents, tearing it into long, wasteful strips, and held up the blanket for her husband's admiration.

It had a startling design: a bold, geometrical pattern in black on vivid yellow.

She spread it wide, stretching out her arms to their fullest extent.

'Try it on, she said to Phiri. 'Is it not beautiful? And warm too. Feel the thickness of it—no wind will creep through that. Pure wool, the trader said. A proper blanket for a chief.'

'Cease your chatter,' Phiri said. His voice was grave but not unkind. 'It is a fine blanket. But there is one among us whose need is greater than mine. Maburu will have a long, cold ride tomorrow night. Take the blanket, Maburu, and may its protection hasten your journey. We look with eagerness to your arrival with the sheep.'

'Maburu is going on a journey?' Siloane asked curiously. Phiri swept aside the interruption as if it were of no account.

'It is an affair which concerns men,' he said and Siloane put on her crushed, dejected air.

'Tell Simpi to send me ten of the best,' Phiri said, continuing his instructions to Maburu, 'ten fine, fat hammals.' And he held out the blanket to Maburu.

'I have received it, my father,' Maburu said. 'Thank you, my father. Hela! I have never seen a finer blanket.' And he slung it over his shoulders and did a few stamping dance steps to show his pleasure. Siloane laughed, but Lepotane saw his father's eyes grow cold. It was a fleeting expression and, the next moment, Phiri too was smiling.

'Hurry now, for it grows late,' he said. 'Shout to the herd to bring your horse. You will go straight to my cattle post. Send the young herd, Thebe, to fetch Simpi

while you guard) the stock. He knows where to find him. When Simpi comes he will pick out the sheep which I require. This can be done by daylight for he will remain at the cattle post until nightfall tomorrow. I do not wish to arouse interest by movement in daylight. Therefore you will return by night and Simpi, when he has seen you on your way, will go back to the place from which Thebe called him. Is all this quite clear?"

'Quite clear, my father.'

A herdboy brought Maburu's horse from where it was grazing on the slopes above the village. Lepotane helped him to saddle it and to sling the sack of maize onto the front of the saddle. Maburu was about to mount when Siloane appeared in the doorway of her hut.

'Your *mofaho*,' she called. 'Did you not ask me for *mofaho*—your food for the road?'

Maburu went boldly into her hut and Lepotane ~~watched~~ the *khotla* anxiously. He hoped his father would not come out to witness this final indiscretion on the part of these two. Maburu had no business to enter Siloane's hut, and he remained inside for much longer than was necessary for him to collect his *mofaho*. Lepotane was relieved when he at last climbed into the saddle and rode off. He stood watching the vivid yellow and black of Maburu's blanket as it pursued its zig-zagging course up the bridle path and disappeared at last over the neck of the pass.

He turned away to find his father standing beside him.

‘You observed the blanket well?’

‘I observed it, my father.’

‘You would know it again?’

‘Certainly. It has an unusual colour and design.’

‘So I thought. It struck me as soon as Siloane opened the parcel. You would recognise it by moonlight, Lepotane?’

‘I think so.’

‘Make very sure. Shut your eyes and recall the pattern of the blanket. The moonlight will not be very strong tomorrow night, but strong enough to recognise so bold a design.’

Mystified, Lepotane stared at his father.

‘Why do you speak so strangely?’ he demanded.

‘What have I to do with the blanket or the moonlight?’

Phiri said quietly: ‘When you said that you did not trust Maburu, you showed good sense, my son.’

‘But,’ Lepotane stammered, ‘did you not say you trusted him as your own son?’

‘Suspicion taints the air. I did not wish Maburu to get the flavour of it in his mouth before he rode away. I have no doubt that he is the one who has betrayed us. He has hinted to the police, or to Musa, that I have had something to do with the theft of the sheep. He cannot tell them where they are to be found for he does not know himself. I am always careful that only my trusted herds know where the sheep go to once they

leave the cattle post. Probably he will make some attempt to find out tonight. But even if he should succeed, by following or questioning Thebe, he will still do my errand. For it is the way of such as Maburu never to do anything openly. He will return with the sheep, hoping to share in the feast, for he is a great lover of meat and beer. Then, when his stomach is full, he will go to the police with what further information he may have gathered. His motive is clear. The Government is more interested in the big men behind the stock thefts than in those who carry them out. As a hired herd he might get a month or two. But I would go to prison for a longer spell—three years perhaps—and that would suit Maburu well. He has cast his eyes on Siloane, my wife. He defiles my trust because he has already defiled my hut. I shall need strong medicine to wipe out this insult and to restore my powers as a man and a husband. Maburu's seed must be destroyed. I shall require a person. I look about me and ask myself who shall this person be? Why not the very one who has caused the trouble? Maburu himself shall provide the medicine to wipe out the foulness he has spread about my village.'

The ice in his father's words and in his eyes seemed to reach down into the heart of Lepotane, freezing his blood. Now he understood all that had puzzled him. His father's words had been false. He had not been deceived by Maburu. This talk of a feast was but a ruse. His lips had lied while his eyes had spoken the truth.

His voice came out small and unrecognisable—the voice of a stranger: ‘*Liretla*,’ he said fearfully. ‘Maburu is to be the victim of a medicine murder?’

‘You have heard me. I require a person that my third hut may be purified and that the police may be unsuccessful in their search for Musa’s sheep. It is reasonable, is it not?’

Lepotane’s breath came in short, uneven jerks making a whimpering sound in his throat.

‘How?’ he asked. ‘How shall this thing be done?’

‘Ndala has left already for the village of Linake behind the range yonder. He will return, two days hence, with one, Rapula. You have heard of Rapula perhaps?’

Lepotane swallowed with a gulping sound. He had seen Rapula, the witch doctor, on more than one occasion, and always his appearance filled him with fear and aversion. He could see him now, a little withered stick of a man, with his monkey tails dancing about his meagre calves and an enormous, odorous turban of cat’s fur on his head. About his neck he wore a necklace of unbreakable objects—a human tooth, the finger bone of a monkey, the foot of a hare and other things, dried and withered beyond recognition, at whose origin one did not care to guess.

‘Yes, my father,’ Lepotane said, ‘Rapula is known to me.’

‘He is an able man, a doctor of repute. It was he who filled my medicine horn some seasons back. But events have shown that the medicine has grown weak with



age and is in need of replenishment. Rapula will know how to prepare the flesh of Maburu so that the mists may descend over the eyes of those who interfere in matters which do not concern them.'

'But there have been many cases where this has not been so. Have you forgotten the many hangings of these last years, my father? Have you no fear that this will be found out?'

'The medicine is only ineffective when it is ill prepared. I have told you that Rapula is a man of great knowledge. The medicine will be of a strength to shut all mouths, to still all suspicion, to send the police back upon their tracks with empty hearts and minds.'

Lepotane said in a sort of anguish: 'How shall I do this thing?'

'There will be men of experience with you. They will know how to act when the time comes. When they tell you: "Cut here," you will cut. Remember only that you attack a traitorous dog whose body, alive, is of value to no man. Have you the heart of a woman, my son? Are you afraid?'

'No,' Lepotane said, making a show of courage. 'No. I shall remember what Maburu is and how he tried to trick us. I shall not be afraid.'

His father looked at him with approval.

'There speaks my son,' he said. 'This then is my plan. You will go with certain men of my choosing and hide yourselves in the cheche bush where it grows close to the bridle path. My nephews Ndala and Makatwane

will be among them. Then, to give you heart, I have ordered Phetla to be of your company.'

'Phetla! The father of Mamolai? I could wish you had not included him, my father.'

'Who should be more loyal than the father of my son's future wife? Trust me, Lepotane, I know the choice to be a wise one.'

Lepotane said fearfully: 'Mamolai is a Christian—if it should come to her ears——

'You are forgetting. The medicine will close all ears. I must go now and attend to our business. Grow in strength, my son. When this thing has been accomplished you will be a man.'

His father turned and walked away from him, leaving him alone. About him the familiar world, the hard baked earth on which he stood, the red huts, the grey aloes, were suddenly alien, as though he stood here for the first time, a stranger and utterly alone.

The brief, winter twilight was descending upon the village. A thin, blue pall of smoke rose from the fires burning outside doorways and hung low in the still, cold air, filling the nostrils with its pungent smell. A herd called from the hillside and his voice echoed across the valley. Sounds of talk and laughter floated out of the huts where the women busied themselves with the preparation of the evening meal. It was the hour Lepotane loved best, but now he felt cut off from it all, as though he had already entered upon the fearful happenings of tomorrow night. Yesterday he would have

sat down at a crackling fire and stretched his hands to the flames, and yarned and boasted and laughed with the rest of them. Even the sight of Mamolai, barefoot now, swaying with a gentle rhythm as she came from the spring with a water-pot on her head, left him unmoved, as though he watched it all from some immeasurable distance of the spirit.

His cousin, Makatwane, of whom he was not particularly fond, came and stood beside him.

‘You have been told?’ he asked.

Lepotane nodded.

‘It is nothing. I have done it before. You take the head in your hands and you twist it, so. It is all over in a second. They don’t resist when they realise that it is ordained. Why, I have even known one who assisted when he understood the purpose for which it was being done.’

Lepotane turned away. He wished the next night might come quickly. He wished that it might never come.

## CHAPTER V

It was cold on the bridle path, a bitter cold that smote the lungs with every breath. In a little thicket of dark cheche bush, concealed among the shadows and boulders, seven men lay waiting. Lepotane crouched close to Makatwane, his cousin, hoping to extract from this contact enough heat to dispell a little of the deadly cold that had taken possession of his body, shaking it from time to time and rattling his teeth in gusts of uncontrollable shivering.

He tried to close his mind to the events which lay before him, to remember his home, the hut of the young men where he slept, the comfort of familiar things, and, above all, the warmth of a fire. But it was no good. Like a horse determined not to leave its home, his thoughts kept veering round and returning to the part he was to play, at once, perhaps, or in an hour, or two hours. For who could say just when the rider would appear on the bridle path above them? It was this uncertainty, this waiting, that chilled his marrow and shook his body, more than the cold of the winter night. He found himself repeating, like a lesson learnt by heart: 'When I recognise the pattern of the blanket pricked out by the moonlight, I am to give the call of an owl.' His voice was low, scarcely more than a whisper.

'Stop worrying,' Makatwane said. 'Everything will go as we have planned. When you give the signal we

will rise up as one man and surround the rider. He will be dragged from his horse and I will do my work quickly. It is important that no blood should be spilled in the killing.'

Because speech was better than silence, Lepotane whispered: 'You say you have done this before?'

'I have.'

'Some seasons back when Rapula filled the medicine horn of my father?'

'Yes.'

'Did the police come?'

'They came. Your father sent his messengers to report that a body had been found below the cliffs. The vultures had picked it almost clean of flesh and the police decided that the man had missed his way going home after a beer drink in Phiri's village. He fell over the cliff and died of exposure. At least, that was the opinion of the medical officer.'

'No one was suspected of murder?'

'No one. The medicine was good. Rapula knows not only which parts of the body make the most powerful medicine, but also what will be the most effective in each case. Tonight, for instance, we are to take the skin of the abdomen from the chest down, one lung, one kidney and the genitals. Last time it was the lips, the heart and the bowels. It was a more difficult operation than it will be tonight, for tonight we kill first. In the previous case Rapula wanted everything taken from the victim while he lived.'

Lepotane repeated faintly: 'He lived?'

'Until I put my hand through a cavity at the base of his neck and drew out his heart. With that he made a curious sound and died.'

Lepotane said quickly: 'Let us speak of other things.'

'As you wish. If your heart is faint, think of Maburu as he was. Recall his swaggering ways and his insolence. He would have betrayed us all to the police. He is the seducer of your father's wife. Furthermore, what is Maburu to any one of us? He is a stranger. Did we herd cattle together as boys? Did we play together? Did we sleep under the same sheep skin in the little stone shelters at the lonely cattle posts? Did we together catch mountain rats and roast them over the same fire when hunger had emptied the little grain sack before its time? Or did we steal an occasional sheep and feast upon it and bear each other out that the sheep had died or fallen over a krantz in a snowstorm? No. Maburu is a stranger.'

Lepotane repeated softly: 'Maburu is a stranger.'

Their conversation ended abruptly as the silence was broken by the rustle of sheep and the shuffling sound of an ambling horse and the creak of a saddle. Then the rider came into view and Lepotane saw the pattern on his blanket pricked out by the light of the moon. He heard an owl hoot and knew that the sound came from his own lips. He felt himself forced forward and found that he was pulling at the horse's bridle as it reared and plunged in sudden fright. He saw the man, dragged to

the ground and heard him cry out one word: '*Molimo,*'—God. He saw the big hands of Makatwane reach out for the man's head and jerk it swiftly sideways.

He did not wish to look and yet, as if impelled, he peered through the dim light, bending close over the figure on the ground. He saw that the neck hung limp and that the eyes were dead, and that the face was that of Simpi, his brother.

A blackness blotted out the moon. He did not feel the impact of stone and hard ground as he crashed, head first, onto the bridle path. He did not taste the gritty earth taste of the sand that filled his open mouth. He did not know how long he lay there, disregarded on the bridle path. Consciousness returned with a black rush of horror and the sound of bells ringing in his head. He could see the dark outline of the men clustered close about something on the ground. Overhead the little moon still shone serenely, looking down upon the grisly scene with an indifference that he found unbearable. He placed his hands over his eyes to shut out the calm face of the moon and, instantly, the horror mounted to his throat and he was sick, retching and groaning, drawing himself up onto his hands and knees in sheer physical agony.

The paroxysm passed. He stumbled weakly to his feet and stood looking up at the sky, at the mountains, at the dark, mottled shapes of the cheche bush, anywhere but at the thing lying on the ground so close to him, or the men intent upon their work.

No one took any notice of him. No one called on him for his assistance or reproached him with being a woman. It was as if they were glad to ignore his presence. Was it because, to each of them, had come his awful moment of recognition? And were they keeping silent for the reason that he too kept silent, because to give it utterance would be to give it truth? Was not each of them saying in his heart, as he tried now to say to himself: 'We killed the man who wore the blanket. The face I saw was a mistake, a trick of the dim light.'

There was a movement among the men and he drew away from them, pressing himself against the bank of the mountain side into which the bridle path had been cut. Sweat spurted from the pores of his skin as he saw Makatwane lift up a billy-can and hold it carefully, keeping it away from his body, as though he did not wish it to touch him. Then the others lifted a dark shape from the ground and placed it on the outspread blanket and, carrying it so between them, moved away up the path and out of sight.

Lepotane knew that they would throw the body over the high krantzes that ran above the river at a point not far distant from where the murder had been done.

For a long time he and Makatwane waited, saying nothing. And, as they waited, the moon dropped behind the sharp outline of the mountains and Lepotane could no longer distinguish the form of Makatwane or the gleam of the tin hanging from his hand. A little wind stirred in the cheche bush, but the sound of it only



seemed to deepen the silence between them. And Lepotane knew that this silence would encase him always. No matter how loud the talk and laughter around him, no matter how feverishly he might match it with his own, this little orbit of silence would surround him always, cutting him off from any close contact with his fellow men. The silence of the moment in which I killed my brother. The words rang in his ears loud and insistent as the bells of his nausea.

At last they heard the owners returning. Two of them rounded up the sheep which had scattered at the first alarm. Then they started down the bridle path together, following the dim forms of the sheep and feeling their way cautiously in the darkness.

When they reached the village the first blue light of dawn was showing in the sky. They went towards the hut where they expected to find Phiri asleep, but he was already up and came out to meet them.

'It went well?' he asked and Makatwane answered: 'We killed the man who wore this blanket as you instructed us,' and he handed Phiri the black and yellow blanket to which the night had added its own dark pattern. Phiri took it from him quicky and, bundling it up, stuffed it under his arm, out of sight beneath his own blanket. Then Makatwane held out the can and Phiri took it from him and examined its contents with interest and satisfaction.

As they spoke, Rapula came out of a hut and joined them. Phiri passed the can to the witch doctor.

'All you require is here,' he said quietly. 'How long will it take you to prepare the medicine?'

'I shall be back with it before dark,' Rapula replied. Then he picked up the billy-can and set out at a shuffling amble for his own village. Phiri watched him out of sight, then he turned to the men.

'You have done well,' he said. 'Now rest. You will have need of sleep.'

But Lepotane did not go to the hut of the young men. Instead he went to the rock where Mamolai had come with her knitting in her hands. He sat down with his back slumped against it, facing to the East, waiting for the sun's rays to come out and warm him, though he knew he would never again be warm.

## CHAPTER VI

Under evil or good the night will pass. The dawn will come and the sun will rise, and the herds will drive their flocks to pasture on the mountain side. The sun described its wonted arc, dragging the day along with it. About him the village stirred, weaving the aimless pattern of its daily activity. To many it was a day like any other, and when they passed his hunched-up, solitary figure, they called a greeting or enquired about his health.

'Are you sick?' they asked. 'It is the *sefuba*. Many of us are sick of the *sefuba* this winter.'

He answered: 'Yes. It is the *sefuba*.'

His father, sitting in the sun in front of the *khotla* hut, pulled serenely at his pipe. His eyes, when they fell upon his young son, had an expression at once remote and faintly amused. Something inside him threatened to set up a clamour at the sight of his father's calm. He wanted to shout out the truth and so bridge the gap of waiting until the truth should proclaim itself.

Some hours later, his cousin, Makatwane, came out yawning from the hut of the young men and, seeing Lepotane sitting alone against his rock, he came over and sat down next to him on the ground.

'Are you ill?' he asked, looking at Lepotane closely. 'It is *sefuba*, perhaps, or something worse. A man does not swoon for nothing.'

Lepotane said bitterly: 'You call the thing I have seen this night nothing?'

'But you did not see the worst of it. You fainted at the outset. I wonder why you found the death of Maburu so disturbing? It is not the first time you have seen a man die.'

For a moment they eyed each other warily, then Lepotane said: 'There is death and death.'

'You take it all too hard,' Makatwane said. 'Believe me, you will get over it. It will pass.'

'This day cannot pass too soon for me. I wish it would end whichever way it must end, as long as it does so quickly.'

'Are you afraid of something?'

'Yes, I am afraid. What sort of day is this? When the dreams of night have been bad one welcomes the light. "It is day," one says "and it was but a dream." Yet here is the day caught up in the evil of the night and the bright sunlight is powerless to dispell its sickly taint.'

Makatwane gave him a look of exaggerated surprise.

'All this for Maburu!' he exclaimed.

Lepotane looked him straight in the eyes.

'Do we speak of Maburu?' he asked.

The body of Makatwane seemed to go limp. He slumped back against the rock and a sigh came from him, deep and shuddering.

'So,' he said, 'it is known to you too.'

There was a long pause in which the very passage of

the shadows on the ground seemed to be arrested. Then Lepotane said softly: 'Maburu watched us. I know it as surely as if I had seen him hiding there beside the bridle path. He will have gone to the police. I wish they would be quick.' And he demanded in a sort of agony: 'Why don't the police come?'

Makatwane rose and stretched himself.

'By tonight,' he said, 'we shall have nothing to fear.'

Lepotane saw that they spoke at cross purposes, and he let him go without saying anything more.

The day advanced to noon and began the swift winter descent towards evening. Fires sprang up outside doorways. The blue smoke rose a little way in the air and hung above the village. Mamolai came with her knitting to sit in the accustomed place in the late sunlight. She too asked him: 'Are you sick?' And, because he was poor company, she turned her back a little towards him and began to sing softly to herself. She did not know that he was occupied with many problems, still piecing together the scattered fragments of the night.

Where, he was wondering, was Maburu at this moment? Had he guessed what had been planned for him and distorted the message so that Simpi came in his stead? Had he given Simpi the blanket, as a present from Phiri, because he suspected the part it was to play? Or was it Siloane who had done the guessing? He remembered how long Maburu had remained in her hut when he was supposed to be collecting his *mafaho*.

Simpi had called her a fool, but he could have been wrong.

Well, soon one would know the answers to all these questions. Very soon. For a puff of dust had appeared on the motor road above the village and, as it drew nearer, he could make out the forms of two horsemen and catch the gleam of brass on police hats and saddlery.

Mamolai was still lost in her song. Should he shock her out of her complacency? 'Mamolai! See, here come the police. Your father has killed a man.' No. Leave her a little to her peace and her singing. The thud of hooves mingling with the thin, reedy descant.

*Jesus, lover of my soul,*

High and nasal. Right at the top of her little black head, under the round, white cap.

## CHAPTER VII

But, after all, it was only the man looking for the sheep who had joined forces with another policeman patrolling the same area. They did not even come into the village but passed by on the bridle path above it, calling a greeting as they went.

‘They are going to try the cattle post again,’ Phiri said, and he laughed, the deep-seated, subdued laughter of a man who is both old and wise. Lepotane felt his father’s laughter deep in his own bowels—like a knife twisting.

A few days’ later, he was to demand of Makatwane again: ‘Why don’t the police come?’

They were walking together through a field of dried maize stalks. Below them, in the distance, the village lay, embalmed in its own tranquility.

‘Why are you so anxious that the police should come?’ Makatwane asked. ‘For myself, I am not looking forward to their arrival. They can make things pretty uncomfortable with their questions, even when one knows that the medicine will bring their prying to nothing.’

‘I don’t know how you can bring yourself to talk of the medicine. Down there, in the village, they are preparing for the feast. My father is killing sheep and brewing beer. Men and women are washing their clothes and getting themselves ready for the dancing.

A feast! While the vultures tear the flesh from my brother's bones.'

'You brood too much upon this thing. Simpi is dead, but death is the destiny of us all.'

'At this moment,' Lepotane said, 'I would welcome my destiny. Nothing could bring me greater torment than the life of the last few days. My father's calm maddens me. I want to shout the truth in his impassive face and see it break up like a shattered bowl. What, I keep asking myself, will happen when the police arrive and he learns that Simpi and not Maburu has been killed? The question has become more terrible to me than the moment which I know must come.'

'You can leave the medicine to take care of that. It can work strange things, Lepotane.'

'Again, the medicine!'

'Why not? What is done is done. Simpi was a brave man. The most powerful medicine comes from such as he. Maburu has the heart of a jackal. The medicine of a lion is more potent than the medicine of a jackal. Even your father may recognise this fact.'

'I cannot stand this waiting,' Lepotane broke in. 'Day after day I have strained my eyes and ears for the coming of Maburu and the police. Why does he delay? Why does he not come?'

'I fancy you are not the only one who asks that question. Have you noticed Siloane? Each day she grows more restless and anxious. She is beginning to be worried at the absence of Maburu.'



Lepotane said bitterly: 'She should know that Maburu is safe enough. I believe she is at the bottom of it all. She was not deceived by my father's sudden kindness to Maburu. Why did she call him into her hut before he left? Since when has it been the duty of Siloane to supply Maburu with *mafaho*? I believe she persuaded him to give Simpi the blanket and let him come in his stead.'

'But now Maburu does not come and she grows anxious. She wonders if, after all, Maburu believed in her fears and acted on her advice.'

They were drawing near to the village now and, as if conjured there by his thoughts, Lepotane saw Siloane leaning against the wall of a hut and watching their approach with a sullen, anxious face. Her idleness and preoccupation were the more noticeable since all around her the village hummed with activity, engaged in preparation for the coming feast. Women hurried from hut to hut, carrying on their heads basins of the raw meat which the men were hacking from the carcasses of the slaughtered sheep. Others, coming from a stream below the village, spread out their newly washed clothes in the sunlight, making a vivid pattern of brightly coloured prints and shiny, artificial silks.

When Siloane saw them approaching, she straightened from her leaning attitude and came to meet them.

'Leave us,' she said abruptly to Makatwane, 'I wish to speak privately to my stepson.'

Makatwane moved off obediently, but not before

he had thrown Lepotane a meaning look. Siloane motioned with her head to a place behind one of the huts.

‘Come over here,’ she said to Lepotane.

He followed her reluctantly, noticing, against his will, the smooth flow of her hips beneath the tightly swathed blanket. His hatred for her had sprung up so suddenly and with such strength since the night of the murder, that it hurt him to concede her anything and even her physical beauty had become an affront to him.

Once out of sight and earshot of the others, she turned to face him, looking at him strangely, as if they shared some uneasy intimacy.

‘Where is Maburu?’ she asked.

He took a long time to answer. Then he said: ‘How should I know?’

‘Maburu was to have brought sheep from the cattle post. The sheep are here, but Maburu is not with them.’

His anger rose in him to a white heat, yet his voice was low and strangely calm.

‘What is Maburu to you?’ he asked, and it was as if he bit upon the bitter seed of the whole tragedy.

He repeated: ‘What is Maburu to you?’

Siloane flung up her head and her lips grew thick with resentment.

‘That is none of your business,’ she said. ‘It is enough that a man has disappeared and that I am asking you what has become of him.’

‘Why don’t you ask my father?’

‘I did ask him,’ she flared. ‘Don’t imagine that I am afraid to ask. He told me that Maburu brought the sheep down at dawn and returned at once to the cattle post.’

‘Well—then you know what has become of Maburu. Why do you question me?’

‘Because I know that the man who brought the sheep did not return. I am asking you if that man was Maburu.’

‘How should I know?’

She came very close to him and spoke rapidly and directly into his face.

‘You were out on the bridle path that night, weren’t you? I saw you go off, stealing away one by one, you and Makatwane and old Phetla. There was a *liretla* committed that night, Lepotane, wasn’t there?’

He backed away from her but she followed, catching hold of his blanket where it was pinned across the chest.

‘Answer me,’ she demanded, ‘who was the man you killed?’

He felt hysteria rising in his throat.

‘I do not know,’ he cried, ‘I do not know.’

‘Hush,’ she said. ‘Silence. Do you want the whole village to hear you? Who was the man you killed, Lepotane? Could it have been Simpi, your brother?’

He tried to break away from her again, but she held him with surprising strength. Then, because he could

not bear the sight of her face so close to his own, he covered his face with his hands.

'Simpi,' she repeated, 'Your brother. Your dearly loved brother. Did you stand by and let them kill him, Lepotane? Did you take a hand in it yourself? Did you hack into his body in search of the organs that Rapula required? His heart perhaps? Did you take that, Lepotane?'

He pushed her from him with such violence that her hand slipped from his blanket and she lurched against the wall of the hut.

'No,' he said excitedly, 'it was your lover, Maburu, whom we killed.'

She sprang towards him, fear and alarm written upon her face. Then she stopped. Something in the drooping shoulders of Lepotane and the face which again he had hidden in his hands, made her pause. She drew a long breath.

'You would not care so much if it had been Maburu,' she reflected. 'Your face is the colour of ash.' Then, seizing him by the arm, 'Speak, and do not lie to me. Was it Simpi?'

'Leave me in peace,' he muttered. 'Leave me in peace.'

'Not until I know the truth.'

He looked up then, and the loathing she saw in his face made her draw back, away from him.

'You know the truth,' he said. 'It was you who brought it about. My brother's blood is on your hands

as surely as if you had been on the bridle path yourself.'

She laughed, a tremulous laugh, close to hysteria.

'So, it was Simpi.' Then, as her courage grew with the realization of her relief, she said roughly, brutally: 'Well, what are we waiting for? Why don't you give a hand with the preparation for the feast? I shall enjoy watching you dance. I myself am in the mood for dancing. Keep an eye on me tonight. I shall dance better than I have ever danced before.' And she stepped out from behind the hut swaying her hips and clapping her hands above her head. Infected by her gaiety, the women uttered shrill, ululating cries, and stamped their feet to the rhythm of the chief's wife's dancing.

## CHAPTER VIII

The night was dark but the light from the fires fell on the gleaming skin of the dancers, lighting up, for a moment, a face, an arm raised upwards, a fragment of bright cloth. Meat had been heaped upon the living flames, and a thick column of blue smoke rose steadily into the still air, charged with the smell of burning fat, and cow dung and the sweet smelling sehalahala bush.

Men joined in the dance or withdrew from it to stand at their ease and eat the hot, half raw meat, or take a long, cool drink of beer from a gourd, a horn cup, or an empty jam tin. Tongues and limbs were loosened together and the dust rose from stamping feet while a steady drone of talk and laughter beat upon the ear with the same, ceaseless rhythm.

Withdrawn, in the shadows, Lepotane stood watching. He had no appetite for food, but, as fast as his cup emptied, he filled it again from one of the big vessels of red clay which held the beer. Between the beer and the great misery in his heart, he was already very drunk. Suddenly he was noticed by one of the dancers who called to him to join in the dance. He lurched forward unsteadily, thinking, as his grief mounted to a frenzied climax, that he would find some relief in the violence of the dance. Stamping, writhing, kicking, he hurled himself into their midst.

A ring of watchers had formed about the dancers and, suddenly, in the middle of a tremendous leap, he saw the face of Mamolai, composed and aloof, within a few yards of him. Beside her stood someone whose presence here was strangely incongruous. Among the gleaming, bare torsos, the blue cotton mine trousers, white-patched at knee and seat, the brightly coloured blankets, he stood in his neat, dark suit, peering through a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles. Lepotane stopped dancing instantly and swaggered up to them.

‘Why aren’t you dancing with the other women?’ he demanded of Mamolai.

She said, with downcast eyes: ‘I do not care for this sort of thing.’

He spoke in a voice that was new to him, a nasty, bitter voice and, without his will, he felt his face adapt itself to the new spirit within him, and knew that it too had become a twisted, bitter thing.

‘Too primitive for you, eh? Yet you can’t keep away. You have to come here to watch the savages taking their pleasure. The poor ignorant things who cannot read or write—the sinners who won’t come creeping to your church. Join in the dance, I say, or keep away altogether.’

A little group of people closed in about them, laughing, good-natured, hoping for the diversion of a lover’s quarrel. Mamolai stepped back, trying to push her way through them. The man in the dark suit placed his hand on her arm with a protective gesture.

'Leave the girl alone, Lepotane,' he said gently.

Lepotane rocked backwards on his heels.

'Ho-ho,' he sneered. 'The schoolmaster. The one who has filled her head with learning and stiffened her neck with pride. What are you doing here, Schoolmaster? Isn't this rather low company for a man of your tastes?'

The man stood, mild and dignified, before the swaying Lepotane.

'I came here because I received an invitation from your father, Chief Phiri,' he said. 'I would not do him the discourtesy of refusing. But I do not think he would care to know that his son insults his guests.'

Lepotane laughed, a laugh without merriment or joy.

'I do not insult you, Schoolmaster,' he said, speaking in a loud voice for all around to hear. 'I am anxious to see that my father's guests make merry. Drink this!' and seizing a gourd from the hand of a man beside him, he thrust it into the schoolmaster's face.

The schoolmaster stood helpless, holding the gourd in his hands, and the crowd laughed, amused at his discomfiture. But Lepotane knew in his heart that the victory had gone to the schoolmaster, and the drunken anger rose in him, black and bitter. He caught Mamolai by the wrist and cried with a great show of bravado:

'Come, Mamolai, show that you are a true Mosuto girl. Join in the dance.'

And he pulled her forward and thrust her towards



the line of women dancers some little distance from the men. Down on her knees she went, swept into the pattern of the swaying arms, the heaving torsos. But her movements were without zest, stiff and mechanical as the movements of a doll.

Then, as he stood beside the schoolmaster, watching her, he saw a change come over Mamolai. A new spirit seemed to enter into her, transforming even her face. Its demure impassivity was broken up and, in a sudden leap of the flames, he saw her eyes, wild and possessed and quite unlike the shy, mild eyes of Mamolai. The blue serge tunic was suddenly absurd, comical, no longer any part of the writhing, vibrating body inside it. Kneeling behind Siloane who led the dancers, Mamolai had been caught up in something stronger than herself. Something deep-seated and primeval charged with all the menace of savagery—its ruthlessness and mysticism.

Lepotane laughed, a short, harsh bark of laughter.

‘It seems that your teaching does not go so deep after all, Schoolmaster,’ he mocked.

The man’s face crumpled with distress.

‘You should not have made her do this,’ he said. ‘It is not a good thing that you have done, Lepotane. I do not know you tonight. You—drunk and a bully—this is something new.’

Drunk and a bully—little men may grow drunk and quarrelsome—someone had said those words before. Only recently those words had been in his ears. Then

he knew that the voice which had spoken them had been his own and, in the red glow of another fire, he saw his brother smile at him. Instantly the fumes of the beer left his brain, leaving it crystal-clear. He felt his agony returning, running through him, clean and strong as a draught of cold water. He heard himself saying quietly:

‘I ask your pardon, Schoolmaster. I have been acting like a fool.’

But the schoolmaster’s attention had wandered. His eyes and the eyes of all were turned upon two little figures who appeared suddenly in the fitful light, two herds whose threadbare blankets had slipped from their shoulders and whose eyes shone large and white and full of fear.

The jester broke from the dancing team and tumbled before the boys, doing them obeisance, calling them chiefs, lords of the land, beseeching them to command him. A roar of laughter broke out above the chanting and stamping and the boys huddled together fearfully, rolling their eyes this way and that.

Phiri, who was gnawing a bone taken that moment from the fire, looked up to see the cause of the laughter.

‘Who are these boys?’ he demanded. ‘Why are they not asleep with the others? This is no place for children.’ He strode towards them until he was close enough to distinguish their faces.

‘They are strangers,’ he said. ‘These are not the children of my village.’

The elder of the two boys spoke in a voice made faint and high with fear.

'We have seen a bad thing,' he said. 'We are looking for Lipapang, our master. We were told we would find him at the feast here.'

'Does anyone know these children?' Phiri called. 'Who is the man Lipapang whom they say they seek?'

A man stepped forward into the firelight.

'These boys are my herds, Chief,' he said. Then, turning to the boys, 'What are you doing here? Why are you not looking after the sheep?'

'We were afraid,' the elder boy said.

'We ran to tell you what we had found,' the other added quickly.

'And what is this thing that you have found,' the man demanded angrily, 'that makes you leave my sheep unherded in the mountains? You shall be beaten for this.'

'Quiet,' Phiri said. 'Give the children a chance to tell their tale. What is this thing that frightened you?'

'When we drove our sheep down to the stream to water them at mid-day, we found the body of a dead man lying below the cliffs in the bed of the stream.'

Silence followed upon the boy's words broken only by odd ejaculations from the crowd about them. 'Heh!' they exclaimed, and 'Auch!' and 'Hela!'

'So,' Phiri said after a long pause. 'the boys have found the body of a man. They did right in coming straight to report it. Do not be hard on them, Lipa-

pang. Young hearts are easily frightened by the sight of death. We will go at once to investigate this thing. Let the children be given food and send the elder one to guide us to the place where the body was found. Give him a tame horse to ride, for he is tired and footsore after his long run.' Then, turning to the crowd, 'I shall have to ask you to return to your homes. There will be no more feasting this night. There is a grave matter to be attended to. First, my messengers will go to the campong to report to the police—Lefa and Majalo—where are you?'

Two men came forward out of the darkness.

'Go at once to the campong,' Phiri said. 'You can be there by sunrise. Report that a body has been found. Tell them I have gone with a number of my men to keep watch over it.'

The two men went off to fetch their horses from a little stone-walled kraal where they had been shut up for the night and Phiri called again: 'Lepotane, my son, come here.'

As though he were waking out of a long and painful sleep, Lepotane moved forward until he stood in front of his father.

'I wish you to accompany me,' Phiri said. 'Call together Makatwane, Ndala and Phetla. We will go together to keep watch over this body until the police arrive. As soon as the herd has eaten and rested a little we shall set out. Are you listening, Lepotane? Do you hear what I am saying to you?'

'I hear you, my father,' Lepotane said, and his voice had a strange and hollow sound. The whole of his being felt strange and hollow as though all heart and spirit had gone out of him leaving him an empty husk, open to the wind's blowing. He made a stumbling movement away from his father and, instantly, the strong hand of Makatwane closed about his arm.

'Keep a careful hold on yourself,' Makatwane whispered. 'Is not this the moment you have been waiting for?'

'I waited for the coming of Maburu,' Lepotane said in the low voice of his agony. 'I was not prepared for this.'

Makatwane answered calmly: 'We cannot always foresee how events will shape themselves. We must wake the herds and send them for our horses. It will soon be light.'

## CHAPTER IX

The grey dawn was lighting up the sky as the riders approached the thicket of cheche bush which had been the scene of that fateful night. Phiri rode close beside the herd. Next came Phetla and Ndala, and then, lagging some distance behind, Lepotane with the watchful Makatwane always by his side. As they reached the cheche bush Phiri turned and made a questioning gesture with his head. Lepotane saw the quick nod of Phetla and hastily looked away. In his head he heard the roll and thunder of drums and knew that his moment was approaching. Now the herd reined in his horse and pointed over the cliff's edge.

'It seems we have arrived,' Phiri called over his shoulder. 'We will dismount here, for the way down these krantzes is only fit for sheep and goats. Let one of you remain with the horses.'

Lepotane saw Makatwane's quick look, but he remained staring before him. He would not seek this escape which was no escape. If the moment he had waited for so long was here, he would do nothing to delay it. In the end it was Ndala who stayed with the horses.

A steep, zig-zagging path, some distance from where the cliffs hung sheer over the river bed, led downward towards the water. It was little used and only the flocks

of the two herds who had been there the previous day had pricked a light pattern into the sand where it showed between rocks and grass.

The men climbed down slowly, keeping their footing and their balance by holding onto shrubs and the large boulders through which the path led. At last they reached the bottom and were able to follow the herd with greater ease as he leaped over pools and rocks, leading them to where the cliffs rose, a sheer face of pink rock reflected in the tranquil water below them.

The sun had risen, staining everything a deep rose colour and, caught in this glow, on a little strip of gravel between the cliffs and the water, they saw the sprawling body of a man. Phiri hurried forward but the others hung back, drawing closer to one another in the suspended moment of their common guilt.

For a long time Phiri remained stooping over the body. At last he rose and they saw that his face had a drawn and ashen look. He beckoned to the herd who approached him fearfully.

'Return to the horses,' Phiri said in a strange constricted voice. 'Make haste.'

The boy turned and scampered off, eager to be gone, and the men stood watching him as he sped, light-footed as a goat, up the steep mountain side.

When he was high above them and out of earshot, Phiri called to the men to come forward. They did so slowly and with reluctance, but he waited until they stood in a close circle about the body. Then he said:

'Look well at the man who lies here dead. Name him.'

No one spoke and he repeated threateningly: 'Name him, I say.'

Then Makatwane said with a bold air: 'Maburu.' The old eyes of Phiri flashed fire upon him.

'You lie!' he cried. 'Four nights he has lain out here beneath the cliffs. The vultures have not found him yet, but had they left me but his bones I would have known my son.'

With that, something broke loose in the breast of Lepotane. His mouth opened wide in a grimace of grief and on his lips he tasted the salt flood of tears as they came gushing from his eyes. Long and childlike he wept, sobbing out the pent up misery of his heart.

'Simpi,' he cried, 'My brother, Simpi.'

'So,' Phiri said, and his voice was low and deadly cold. 'So, after all, there is one among you who has the courage to speak his name. Are you all dumb? Have you lost the power of speech? You had better recover it soon. To save your necks you had better speak and speak quickly. The police will soon be here. You will have to tell them how you came to murder your chief. You will pay the full penalty for this deed. Yes, even you, Lepotane. What evil madness possessed you to be a party to this crime?'

But Lepotane could not speak. Neither accusation nor threat moved him to any attempt at excuse or explanation. It no longer seemed of any importance that his



father should have discovered the thing that had lain hidden in his heart for all these days. His mind was closed to everything but the sight of the body, distorted and mutilated, and the reality it gave to the knowledge that Simpi was dead—lost to him for ever. His weeping, high-pitched and convulsive, like the whimpering of an animal in mortal pain, set his shoulders, his arms, the whole of his body, shaking and jerking like the movements of some grotesque dance. It was Makatwane who answered for him. 'It was no crime, Chief. You ordered us to kill the man who wore the blanket. We carried out your orders.'

Phetla, the father of Mamolai, said: 'The night was dark. The deed was done quickly. We mistook him for the man you had ordered us to kill.'

Makatwane stepped up close to Phiri and his voice had taken on the ring of returning confidence.

'How came Simpi to be on the path that night?' he demanded. 'How came he to be wearing the blanket given to Maburu?'

Phiri rocked back on his heels as if this new line of thought, opened up by Makatwane, had pulled up short the frantic, headlong rush of his anger and accusation against them.

'Where is Maburu now?' he asked.

'We have been asking that ourselves,' Makatwane said, watching with satisfaction the confusion and hesitation in the old man's eyes. But, in a moment, it was gone and his anger blazed out again.

‘Why did you keep this thing from me?’ he demanded. They answered him with one voice.

‘We were afraid.’

Makatwane said in a voice that was suddenly soft and persuasive: ‘Even to each other we were afraid to admit our terrible mistake. Each of us has kept it locked within his own breast. And then, what use to have spoken, my Chief? Simpi was dead. More than ever we needed the protection of the medicine.’

‘The medicine,’ Phiri repeated, and his voice shook with horror. He fumbled in his clothing and drew out the medicine horn. It lay for a moment in his outstretched palm. Then he hurled it far over the boulders.

‘That, for such medicine,’ he cried.

Makatwane took careful note of where the horn had fallen.

‘Do not be hasty, my Chief,’ he said. ‘There will be trouble enough when the police arrive. Simpi was a brave man, a fearless chief. The medicine will be powerful stuff.’

Phiri slumped down on a low rock. He covered his face with his hands. Dejection and indecision were written in every line of his body. Makatwane sat down quickly beside him, and, still in his new, sweet voice, he said, speaking as though he were coaxing a child: ‘The true culprit is the one who worked this trick on us. Maburu is the murderer of your son, Chief. He guessed that he was not being sent on this night errand

by chance. He is full of the wiles and suspicions of the guilty. They trust no man for they cannot themselves be trusted.'

Phiri jumped to his feet in sudden, hysterical anger.

'Maburu!' he cried. 'The filthy, traitorous dog! If I could but lay my hands on him! Where is he? Find him wherever he may be hiding. Bring him to confront me here, over the dead body of my son.'

Makatwane could not have been said to smile, but his expression lightened at the old man's words.

'I expected him to go to the police,' he said, 'but as they have not come, I must have been mistaken. It seemed likely that he would have followed Simpi, at a distance, to be a witness to the murder. He should then have gone straight to the police. But Maburu is a coward. What he saw may have frightened him. He would know too that, should we discover the mistake in time, his life would not be worth much. It is possible that, instead of undertaking the long ride to the camp, he returned to his own village. When a jackal is afraid, he runs for his own hole!'

They drew close round the chief as Makatwane spoke—all but Lepotane who, in a trancelike state of misery, stood motionless beside his dead brother. His tears had stopped and in their place had come a numbness that denied all feeling. He saw the movement of the men converging on the two figures and knew that they had taken heart from Makatwane's clever handling of the situation and the manner in which he had

turned the chief's wrath away from them and against Maburu. Phetla, adding his voice to that of Makatwane, said:

"If we could persuade the police that Maburu has committed this crime, they would soon unearth him from his hole."

'It will be his word against that of all of us,' Makatwane pointed out. 'Maburu was sent to fetch sheep from the cattle post. Simpi decided to return with him. On the way, they quarrelled and a fight took place between them. Maburu threw Simpi over the cliffs and ran away. When he did not come with the sheep, we went out to see what had happened and found the sheep grazing by the wayside. We concluded that Maburu had deserted them. His feckless ways are well known to us. Better still, we will say that two of the sheep were missing. We thought that he had stolen them and run away. But now Simpi's body has been found and we realize that he has been murdered by Maburu.'

Phiri was an old man, but he had never before shown any sign of the weakness of age. Now, all at once, he seemed bowed down by it. His body took on a bent and desiccated look. He put out a bony hand and clung to the arm of Makatwane as though to avail himself of a strength that he had been forced to recognise.

'You will speak for me to the police?' he quavered. 'You will see that Maburu is hanged for this crime?'

Then Makatwane permitted himself to smile openly

and Lepotane felt a coldness stealing through his veins. Here was ruthlessness untempered by compassion. While Simpr lay there in the distortion of a hideous death, Makatwane could smile, secure in the strength of his terrible indifference. In that instant, Lepotane understood the full danger of the man. Harmless in himself, half rogue, half poet, Makatwane would always be sought by those whom discretion, or cowardice, or mere queasiness of the stomach, prevented from making an open bid for the things to which fear or greed was driving them. In his detached indifference to suffering in others, or fear of it in himself, they would recognise his strength. He was the perfect medium through which evil would find its course, the living translation into action of the dark thoughts and desires of men. •

‘Yes,’ he said gently, ‘you can leave it all to me.’

And Lepotane turned away because he could not endure the sight of his father clinging, helpless, to the arm of the man who had killed his son.

## CHAPTER X

So the long hours of waiting passed. And it seemed to Lepotane that the blades of grass, the rocks, the still pools of water, the little bright autumn leaves on shrubs and bushes, all bore the stamp of grief and horror with which this place must always be imbued. Nothing, he felt, neither the coming of a new day, nor season's change, nor storm, nor sunlight, nor birdsong, would cleanse it ever from its taint of death.

Towards noon there came a movement on the bridle path above them and a man's voice hailed them in Sesuto.

'You, down in the valley there, are you the men of Phiri who guard the body of the dead man?'

Makatwane stepped back to the edge of the stream to get a better view of the path.

'It is the police,' he said, 'and there are two white men with them.'

Then, in the long, echoing call that is used to send messages from village to village, he answered the man on the path, letting him know that they had arrived at their destination and that the chief himself awaited them below.

'They must have taken the short cut over the mountains from the campong,' Makatwane said. 'No doubt the messengers are supposed to have learnt the locality of this place from the herds before leaving the village.'

They have pack animals with them which means they will make camp while they carry out their investigations. It seems they are going to make quite a fuss." And he looked significantly and doubtfully at the old chief.

But Phiri had recovered himself. His childishness and irresolution had passed and the cloak of impassive dignity which he habitually wore, and never so closely wrapped as in the presence of white men, was about him again. He waited, serene and upright for the descent of the police party. It consisted of a native police sergeant, the trooper who had first come to the village in search of Musa's sheep, a European police officer of the rank of Captain and a medical officer. When they reached the bed of the stream, Phiri went forward to meet them. His face showed nothing. Its immobile lines might have been cut from the rocks about them and of the same age.

He said abruptly: 'The dead man is my son, Simpi.'

Makatwane had been following close behind the chief and he noted, with inward satisfaction, the quick look that passed between the four men. Clearly, this was a development for which they were unprepared. There had been no mention of *lirella* on that previous occasion when a body had been found in Phiri's ward, but, doubtless, the police had had their suspicions. They always had their suspicions. This time they had come prepared to make a very thorough investigation.

But now; right at the outset, any preconceived ideas

they might have had of Phiri's guilt had been shattered. It was well known what store he set by his son and heir. The closed face of suspicion, which Makatwane had seen upon each of the approaching men, changed at once to one of open sympathy and concern. The police officer spoke kindly to Phiri, telling Makatwane to lead him aside while the medical officer made his examination of the body.

As the white-coated figure of the doctor bent over the dead man, the flies, disturbed, rose up in a black cloud and the sickly smell of putrefaction was intensified. Lepotane, who all this time had been slumped against a bank, a little distant from the body, felt again the rushing sounds in his ears, the nausea, the darkening of his sight. He hoped that he would lose consciousness as when he had seen his brother killed, but the merciful oblivion did not come. Instead, the whimpering started up again and he fell to the ground, tearing and clawing at the rough earth with his hands. He welcomed the smart of it, the agony of the sensitive quicks under his fingernails, the bruising of his body on sharp stones as he writhed and twisted. He opened his eyes wide that the blue brilliance of the sky might shock his eyeballs with fresh pain. But, instead of the sky, it was the face of the doctor he saw, and the stiff, white folds of his starched coat. The doctor took hold of his wrist, holding it lightly but firmly between his fingers. He spoke in a tongue which Lepotane could not understand.



'This fellow is on the verge of a complete collapse,' he said. 'This is no play-acting. Pass me my bag.'

He held a small glass container to Lepotane's lips. 'Noa,' he said; 'drink.' It had a sharp pungence that took away his breath. Then the doctor made him drink again, a gentle brew this time, that sent a sweet peacefulness creeping through his blood. They helped him to his feet and led him to a patch of soft sand which lay in the shade of some thick, bushy shrubs growing along the bank. They told him to lie down. His limbs felt heavy and he was glad to sink down on the sand.

All the anguish had been removed from him, taken far away over the tops of the mountains. The murder, the mutilated body of his brother, all the horror of the past week floated gently from him, as though it had all taken place in some other, distant world that had nothing whatever to do with him. He slept.

When he woke, the doctor was standing at the stream pulling off the tight rubber gloves he had been wearing. He threw them on the ground and bent to wash his hands. Lepotane glanced quickly to where the body had been lying. It had been placed on a blanket and covered with another—the clean white blanket which his father had been wearing. There was a strong smell of disinfectant in the air. The white men had put their stamp upon the scene. All now was orderly, clinical, dispassionate.

'I have completed my examination,' the doctor said. 'The body can now be removed for burial.'

Phiri signalled to the two messengers.

'Carry the body to the village,' he said. 'Ndala and Phetla will assist you. Have it placed in the empty hut of my sister, Mathabo. I shall follow later. I have something to discuss with the police.' And he made a quick gesture with his hand, indicating that Makatwane should fall in beside him. Together they approached the police party who stood talking in low voices among themselves.

'Have you established the cause of my son's death?' he asked.

'His neck was broken,' the medical officer replied.

'In his fall from the cliff?'

'It is difficult to say. It could have been in the fall, of course.'

'Or it might have been broken first: I do not think my son fell over those cliffs alive. Simpi could have found his way down the pass blindfold. He has travelled it since he was a child.'

The police officer asked: 'Was there anyone likely to have wished the death of your son?'

'How can one tell? I know only that my herd, Maburu, was sent to my cattle post to fetch sheep for the feast I held last night. He did not return and Makatwane here went out to look for him. He found the sheep abandoned by the wayside. Two of them were missing. We thought then that Maburu had stolen the sheep and run away. It seemed that Simpi had lent Maburu a fresh horse—his own having perhaps gone

lame, for a horse which we knew to belong to Simpi was found grazing not far from the sheep.'

'And why should Maburu have stolen two sheep but left the horse?' the sergeant asked. 'Did that not strike you as strange?'

Makatwane said quickly: 'Everyone knows that that is Simpi's horse. He would have known better than to be seen riding it. A sheep is not so easily recognised.'

'But now,' the sergeant said, 'we know that it was Simpi who rode his own horse. What then of Maburu? Do you suggest that he murdered your son for the sake of two sheep?'

'I am no longer sure that Maburu is responsible for the missing sheep,' Phiri said calmly. 'There is a much more likely explanation for his disappearance. I think that, for some reason, Simpi elected to accompany Maburu and that a fight took place between them, there on the bridle path above us. I believe that Mabura killed my son and threw his body over the cliff to make it look like an accident.'

'What sort of man is this Maburu?' the police officer asked.

'A plausible, dishonest rogue,' Phiri said fiercely.

'Yet you employ such a man as your herd?'

'I employed him first because he was a good herd. It was only after some time that I discovered his other qualities.'

'Yet you did not dismiss him?'

'One does not readily make an enemy of such as

Maburu. It is easy to take revenge at the lonely cattle posts where sometimes only a boy is left in charge. Nevertheless, I took the precaution of withdrawing him from my cattle post as soon as I heard of his bad reputation.'

'I see. You know of his reputation, then?'

Phiri said blandly: 'That he is an accomplished stock-thief, yes. I have even suspected that he had something to do with the theft of Musa's sheep. He was not above doing some business for himself while he was employed as my herd.'

'All this,' the police officer said, 'does not make the man a murderer.'

'He has been in my village for some weeks,' Phiri said, 'and during that time he has shown himself to be quarrelsome, insolent and bad-natured. He may not have intended to kill my son, but he is of the kind that does not think before he acts when his anger is aroused. Simpi may well have had cause to protest against his insolence; and my son was not a man to look for gentle words when he was moved to anger or contempt.'

The officer considered for a moment, then he asked:

'Why did you not report the matter of the missing sheep to the police?'

Phiri shrugged.

'A herd steals a sheep and runs away. These things happen every day. We do not trouble the police with such small matters. But now my son is dead and

Maburu has disappeared. Is it unreasonable to suppose that these events are in some way connected?

The look which Makatwane gave the old chief was warm with approval. In the minds of the police party the seed could be seen to strike root. There was a short, thoughtful silence. Then the police officer said: 'I will send the sergeant to the village of Maburu. There will surely be news of him there if not the man himself. Trooper Khali will go to the cattle post to interview the herd, Thebe. It is possible that he may be able to tell us what took place between Simpi and Maburu and why, contrary to the chief's orders, Simpi was on the bridle path that night. Meanwhile, the medical officer and I will camp at Phiri's village. Private Mafubi who is waiting above with the packs will accompany us.'

They let the pack train with the two white men go ahead. Then the three who remained, Phiri, Makatwane and Lepotane, collected their horses and followed at a distance. His strength had come back to Lepotane and his head was clear now of the drug which the doctor had given him. He no longer felt sleepy, but in his mind there was an emptiness, a spent numbness as though, having lived, in the space of hours, through the whole range of bitter, human experience, there was nothing left for him to feel. But this detachment was not to last long. For when they caught up with the desolate procession, the four men moving slowly with their white-covered burden, such compassion and yearning sprang up in his heart, that it seemed as though it must burst

out of his body with the weight of it. He flung himself from his horse and said to old Phetla:

‘Here, take my horse. I will help with the carrying.’

They protested. He had been ill. The weight of the body was great. But he answered, tensing his muscles, eager as a beast under the weight of a loved master:

‘Who shall carry my brother home if not I?’

## CHAPTER XI

Night had come, silent except for the thin wailing of the women gathered round the hut of Mathabo. Lepotane sat with Makatwane over a fire outside the hut of the young men. He sat hunched up, his shoulders bowed, his arms clasping his knees, a strong contrast to the upright Makatwane whose eyes shone in the firelight, whose nostrils had the flared, pointed look of one who goes into battle, eager and confident.

'One way and another,' Makatwane was saying, 'things have gone better than I expected. Maburu will be under arrest by now—that is if they found him at his village.'

Lepotane spoke in a low voice, letting the words pour out from the pent up bitterness of his heart.

'What does that help me? Will Maburu's death bring me back my brother? This morning my father was still a powerful man. Have you seen how he looks now when he is not borne up by his pride in the presence of the white men? Old and broken and dry—like a dead tree. My veins are still young, but tonight the sap that fills them has gone sour and weak. There—' he pointed into the darkness, 'in the deserted hut of Mathabo, lies the desecrated body of my brother. The noise of the women rasps through the raw nerves of my head. I wish they would be still.'

As though he had not spoken at all, Makatwane went on in his firm, confident voice; bent on over/riding the sick scruples of his companion:

‘Everyone is saying that Maburu is the murderer. He doesn’t stand a chance.’

‘Except Siloane,’ Lepotane said. ‘She goes about with a sly smile. She is not afraid for Maburu.’

‘No one will take into account anything that Siloane may say. He was well known to be her lover. She will be fearing for him before long.’

Lepotane sighed with a great weariness.

‘Simpi is dead,’ he said. ‘Why should we lie and scheme in order to live a little longer ourselves? If only there were a way of going back. If only we could unravel time and undo the stitches of our deeds as Mamolai unravels her little white caps when they displease her. I wish I were back in the cave with Simpi and the sheep. It was enough to sit and cook his food and listen to him speak. Now there remains only the thing in the hut that was once my brother. You are excited by your battle of wits with the police, by your determination to put this crime on Maburu, but Maburu is nothing to me. It is my brother, Simpi, I want. Not Maburu—alive or dead.’

Makatwane made a movement of impatience.

‘We are men,’ he said. ‘It is not such a new thing to lose a brother.’

And Lepotane did not answer him. What use to try to explain, to one who felt as little for others as he did



for himself, the anguish one could carry on behalf of another?'

Cold and silent, the night crept close about them. Even the women ceased their wailing and gave themselves to the stupor of their half-sleep. From the doorway of the officer's tent, pitched high against the hillside, a light shone, steadfast and unwinking, watching them like a small, bright eye.

## CHAPTER XII

Again the night passed and the grey dawn lightened in the East and the sun rose and shone upon the stricken village, stirring it into uneasy life.

Stiff and cold, Lepotane crouched beside the fire which had gone out. If he had slept a little, there had been no shaking off of his distress and he woke, not to meet it afresh with the new day, but simply to a fuller realisation of something which had never wholly left him for one minute of the night.

With the coming of daylight, certain of the men took spades and picks and, going some distance to where the burial ground of the village lay, began the digging of Simpi's grave. The thud of spade and pick biting into the dry earth was the sound of death itself; slow, inevitable, rhythmic, final.

In the village, the preparation for the new day went on in desultory fashion. Women lit their fires as usual and prepared food and called to the men and children to come and eat. But there was no heart in what they did. No shouting from hut to hut, no laughter, no jesting, no song. All were weighed down by their mourning and the close presence of the police camp. Ears listened for the sound of horsemen. Eyes turned again and again to scan the bridle path.

At last those whom the village awaited appeared.

First they were no more than distant, moving dots upon the mountain side but, as they came closer, they assumed the forms of men and horses, of police and the herd, Thebe, and the hated Maburu who, the village whispered, had killed the chief's son.

As the party came riding in among the huts, old Phiri rose to meet them. All morning he had sat in the sun with his blanket pulled up over his face, neither speaking nor eating nor making any sign. His followers gathered round him but he ignored them. He walked straight up to Maburu.

'Murderer of my son,' he said.

Maburu looked at him with a blank face.

'Not so fast, Chief,' the sergeant said. 'You will have the chance of making your accusations later. My instructions are to take these two straight to the tent of the police officer. He will question them first himself.'

A crowd had quickly gathered about them.

'Make way there,' the sergeant said, 'The officer is waiting,' and he pointed to where the police officer could be seen, standing a few paces from the tent and looking down upon the activity in the village with close attention.

A small group of people had gathered about the tent, women mostly who, taking advantage of the presence of the doctor, had come to ask his help for their sick—a child with an umbilical hernia, a child with syphilitic sores on its head, a baby with dysentery, a baby who

failed to thrive on the diet of mazina and water provided by its foster mother. Now, as the police approached, this little crowd broke up and was quickly dispersed. The men went into the tent, leaving their horses to graze, free-reined on the hillside. For a long time all was still about the tent while, down in the village, the people waited, irresolute, not knowing how to resume the disrupted pattern of their simple, daily routine. They shuffled around, spoke in low voices, and showed all the restive signs of an audience that has been kept over-long waiting for the curtain to go up.

At last, as the shadows were shortening into noon, the police party, accompanied by Thebe and Maburu, came down into the village.

‘I would like you,’ the police officer said, addressing Phiri, ‘to listen to the story which this man, Maburu, has just told us.’

Old Phiri said, stubbornly: ‘I shall hear all that he has to say when he tells it to the court. I wish now only to see him arrested for the murder of my son. I do not wish to waste time listening to the lies he has invented to get himself out of trouble.’

The police officer said: ‘We will first satisfy ourselves that what he has to say is indeed a lie. The story he has told us is corroborated by the herd, Thebe. So far I can find no reason to believe that it is not the truth.’

Phiri said only: ‘You do not know the man as we do.’

Maburu spoke easily, taking no notice of the antagonism surrounding him.

'There is not much to tell. I was sent to the cattle post of Chief Phiri to fetch sheep for the feast which was held two nights back. We parted on good terms—the chief even giving me his new blanket to keep out the cold on the return journey which was to be made by night. All went well until I arrived at the cattle post. There, as Thebe will testify, I was taken ill. I therefore told Simpi to take the sheep in my stead which he agreed to do. Further, since he was to make the journey, I thought it only right that he should have the benefit of the blanket. I have been accused of fighting with Simpi, but Thebe can testify that we parted friends.'

'All this,' the police officer said, 'has been borne out by the boy, Thebe. Further, the sergeant has ascertained that Maburu did indeed go back to his village on the night of the murder and that, next morning, he consulted the *ngaka* regarding his illness. The *ngaka* has said that there were no signs of violence on his person, and the medical officer here too can find no trace of bruises or abrasions such as one might expect to find on one who had lately been in a fight.'

Makatwane said, in his gentle, reasonable voice, addressing the police officer:

'Morena, Chief Phiri is sick with grief and shock. He has expressed the wish that I speak for him. I ask to be allowed to put to this man, Maburu, the questions

to which the chief would like to hear the answers.

The police officer nodded assent and Makatwane said to Maburu: 'I believe all that you have told us as it is corroborated by the herd, Thebe. I believe that he saw you riding off with Simpi—the latter wearing your blanket. He expected you to accompany him as far as the place where the path forks off to your own village, but he did not see you take that path. We know only that, the last time Simpi was seen alive, you were with him. I contend that you did not leave Simpi at the branching of the paths. For some reason you continued to ride with him. Perhaps your illness had passed. We all know that you are not a man to miss a feast if you can help it. I believe that a fight took place between you and Simpi and that you killed him and threw his body over the krantzes. You then returned to your village, arriving there some time towards morning, and not in the first part of the night as you would otherwise have done. The truth of your story can only be upheld by the time you actually arrived in your village, and who can rightly say what that time was when the stars and the moon are its only recorders and those who saw you come were dazed with sleep?'

Makatwane paused, and a little murmur rose from the crowd like the angry drone of bees. There was a clicking of tongues, a shaking of heads.

'Tell me,' Makatwane continued, turning to the police sergeant, 'who testified to this man's arrival in the village?'

The sergeant answered: 'He went to the hut of one, Mapoone, and knocked until she opened the door to him. He spent the rest of the night with her.'

'This woman is Maburu's lover, then?'

'It would seem so.'

'How comes she to be living alone?'

'Her husband is away at the mines.'

'I see. A slut who opens her door at night to any man who knocks. And does this witness say that Maburu came in the first part of the night?'

'She does.'

'And is she the only witness?'

'Until the morning, yes.'

Makatwane shrugged and turned away.

'I have no further questions to ask,' he said, making his voice sound as though he spat.

Old Phiri said fiercely: 'It is a treacherous killer that shows no mark upon himself. There was no man with my son, while yet he lived, but you. Who else could have killed him?'

Maburu answered: 'That is a dangerous question, Chief. But since it has been asked, I will answer it. It was not my wish to be mixed up in the events of the night of which you speak. When these things take place it is best to be far away and to know nothing. When Phiri sent me on this night journey and gave me the blanket, I was uneasy. I feared that I had not succeeded in hiding from him the fact that I am in love with his young wife. I knew also that the police had been to the

village on the tracks of certain sheep stolen from Musa. I guessed that the chief would feel it necessary to strengthen himself against this double threat to his well-being. Siloane was of the same mind as myself. She warned me not to return, but rather to send Simpi in my stead.' Then he added significantly: 'Could we have been wrong in thinking that the chief's son would be safe? Or was it that he wore the chief's blanket and so was killed in mistake for me?'

This time there was no murmur from the crowd. A deep, appalled silence held them all; a silence that was broken only by the voice of the police officer: 'The blanket,' he said slowly, 'Where is this blanket of which Maburu and Thebe have spoken? There was no blanket with the body.'

'No,' Makatwane said quickly. 'You should have searched the hut of Maburu's whore. That is where you would have found it.'

The sergeant snapped his fingers in self-impatience.

'I should have thought of it,' he said. 'Of course—that is the link. If Maburu had had the blanket he would have had to explain how it came to be there after his story of having given it to Simpi.'

A soft voice said: 'You are talking of a blanket?' No one had noticed Siloane coming up so silently on her bare feet, swaying gracefully as she minced over the rough ground.

'Could it be this?' and, before the eyes of them all, she spread the black and yellow blanket on the ground.



smoothing out its folds, that nothing told by the dark, dried blood stains might be lost.

'How did you come by this blanket?' the sergeant asked, and Siloane said, with her face shy and innocent: 'Some days ago, when I was putting the hut of the young men in order, I found this blanket among the things of Lepotane. I saw that it was dirty and took it with me intending to have it washed. But I forgot.'

'Did you not know that it was Maburu's blanket?' the police officer asked.

'Certainly I did. I was present when my husband gave it to him. When Maburu did not return with the sheep, I enquired why this was and was told that he had brought them down at dawn and returned at once to the cattle post. I concluded that Maburu had left the blanket with Lepotane—some accident having come to it during the night.'

'Did you not wonder what manner of accident it had been to leave a blanket stained with blood?'

Siloane said calmly: 'I did not examine it closely. I saw only that the blanket was dirty and required washing. It is only now, in the bright light, that I see the stains are blood.'

'And who,' the sergeant asked, 'told you this tale of Maburu's having come with the sheep?'

Siloane did not reply at once. She stood, deep in thought, as though she were trying to remember something. Then she said: 'Now I come to think of it, it was Lepotane I asked about Maburu. On the afternoon of

the feast, I called him aside and asked him this question, for I could not understand why Maburu had not returned.'

Phiri said threateningly: 'And why should you have concerned yourself about this man? What is Maburu to you?'

She answered with her face composed, her eyes downcast: 'Nothing. I was curious about the sheep. That was all.'

'It is true,' the crowd murmured, and they turned to one another, recalling events, little noticed at the time, which now assumed a new and sinister significance. 'Yes,' they muttered, 'Siloane called Lepotane to her on the afternoon of the feast. We saw her speak to him in private behind one of the huts.' The gust of recollection rustled through them: 'Yes, I remember. Yes, yes. It is the truth.'

As the fire by which he had sat during the night had died down, leaving him cold and numb, so also the emotions of Lepotane had burnt themselves out, leaving in his mind only an insensible numbness, so that he was scarcely aware of what was going on around him. The arrival of the police, the questioning of Maburu, the murmuring of the crowd, all seemed to him crazed and meaningless. He hung around on the fringe of things, dazed and bewildered, until the sight of the blood-stained blanket brought him back abruptly to the reality of the moment. Horror and grief started up anew, and then, as the gist of Siloane's words was borne in upon him, a

wave of black, nauseous disgust. . . . Siloane was lying. Here, with her lover exonerated by the horrible evidence spread out upon the ground, Siloane must yet find it necessary to lie. In the face of death she was still seeking to serve some secret, twisted motive of her own with lies that, for some mysterious reason, had turned upon himself.

He heard the sergeant's voice and knew that he was speaking to him, knew too that he was repeating something already said while he was still in that trance-like state of half-awareness.

'You have heard this woman's statement, Lepotane. What have you to say?'

He answered: 'Nothing.'

'How came this blanket to be in your hut?'

'It has never been in my possession.'

'Do you deny telling Siloane that Maburu had brought the sheep?'

'I deny it because it is a lie and I am tired of lying. Simpi is dead. Does anything matter so much now that it is necessary to lie?' His voice, as he spoke, rose to an angry shout. Anger flooding his being. Anger against his father, against Makatwane, against all who had lent themselves to be the instruments of Simpi's death. Above all, anger against himself, that he had not the courage of his aversion; that he had allowed his father to force him into something that, from the outset, he had found repugnant and vile. The filth of it all was contamination that could only be cleansed by truth. There should

be no more lying, no more sheltering behind the wretched Maburu. He would strip them bare, one by one, that they might be brought face to face with their guilt, and none should be so naked, so closely confronted, as himself.

'We are all guilty,' he cried. 'If these men have come for the truth, they shall have it. You have heard this woman try to accuse me of my brother's murder. Her story is all lies—and yet it is the truth. Did I not catch the bridle and hold the plunging horse? Did I not help to drag him to the ground? Did I not see the great hands reach out to twist his neck and never raise my hand to save him? He called on God, but it would have been better had he called the name of Lepotane—his little brother. He was already dead when I looked into his face and saw that it was my brother I had helped to kill.'

Everything was too close to him now; the bright face of the sun, the dark faces of his own people, the surprised, red faces of the Europeans. He covered his face with his hands.

'He helped no one,' Siloane cried. 'He did this thing alone. Who could have had a better reason for killing Simpi than Lepotane? Who stood between Lepotane and the chieftainship? Simpi is dead. Who now is Phiri's heir?'

He felt his stomach grow weak and its muscles contract as though he were about to retch. But his new, savage anger rose above these physical symptoms. The

outrage of Silbane's evil accusation was but a little more fuel flung upon the blazing pyre of his wrath against them all, and suddenly, in the light of it, he saw clearly the purpose behind her lies.

'Keep your foul words in your mouth,' he shouted. 'There is no need for them. Your evil plans will have all the success you could wish. My father and I will hang for the murder of my brother. The succession will be safe for Maburu's bastard whom you carry in your womb.'

The crowd was like a field of grass that the wind blows first this way then that. The love between the two brothers was well known, but the murder had upset all their accepted ideas. Their understanding, clouded and befuddled by shock and the quick tipping of the scale of suspicion as each fresh bit of evidence was flung upon it, could not decide which way their sympathy should go. One moment Maburu was the villain, then, grotesque and shameful, Lepotane, the loved brother of the dead man; then Siloane, the betrayer of the chief, the seed of the whole bad business. They did not know what to think, whom to accuse. And as they stood in vacillation, looking this way and that, the police officer spoke quietly.

'You have said that you would speak the truth, Lepotane. We are waiting to hear it.'

'It is this,' Lepotane answered. 'I saw my brother killed. I thought, because he wore this blanket, that he was Maburu. It should have been Maburu, but, by

some treachery, Simpi came in his stead. 'Why this was so Maburu knows, and you, Siloane, you know it too.'

The police officer cut in quickly: 'You say you meant to kill Maburu but why?'

'A person was required for medicine and the person chosen was Maburu.'

Makatwane broke in:

'He is mad. The death of his brother has unhinged his mind. He does not know what he is saying.'

'Be quiet!' Lepotane blazed at him. 'I have told you that I have finished with lies. The police are here, Maburu has come, what purpose can lies serve you now? I and six others waited in the cheche bush for the man who would be wearing the black and yellow blanket. We killed him according to our instructions. Only when he was dead did I recognise my brother's face.'

'Who gave you these instructions?' the police officer asked and, for a while, Lepotane was silent. Everything was silent, as though the air itself was still to hear what he would say. Then, shaking his head to clear it, as a dog shakes water from its ears, he said:

'Chief Phiri, my father.' And the old man looked at him hard in the eyes, with a face as black as stone.

They remained thus for a moment, looking straight into each other's eyes, father and son, the accused and the accuser. And, in that moment, they came very close to each other, as though the reproach of one cancelled out the reproach of the other and they were as one, united and at peace, each accepting from the other the

price of death. Lepotane walked up to his father and the old man withdrew his arm from Makatwane and leaned upon his son.

Still speaking quietly the police officer said:

'Who are the men who accompanied you?' And, mechanically, as if there could be no significance in what he said, Lepotane recited the names: 'Makatwane, Ndala, Majalo, Thepe, Lefa—' he hesitated and looked about him quickly. He saw the great, white eyes of Mamolai fixed upon his face. As though he were breaking the last rivet of the chain which bound him to the past, he said the last name: 'Phetla.' A shrill burst of weeping broke out at the word and he saw that someone was leading Mamolai away and that it was the young schoolmaster.

'Can you tell us how the murder was done?' the police officer asked and Lepotane recounted the dark events of that night, telling all he knew up to the time when the billy-can with its grisly contents was handed to the witch doctor. When they asked him the name of the witch doctor, Phiri seemed to come to sudden life. His grip upon his son's arm tightened and light flashed in his dull eyes.

'Quiet!' he shouted. 'No more! I forbid you to let another name pass your lips.'

Lepotane looked at him wonderingly, as though he found it strange that importance could still be attached to anything. What did it matter what he said, whom he implicated? Life was over for all of them.

## CHAPTER XIII

Life was over. Out of his suffering and confusion emerged at least this single reality, this last awareness, bringing him both certainty and calm. What the ultimate end would be, how it would come and where, were matters that scarcely concerned him, as though, between him as he now was, and all that was to come, there hung a thick, impenetrable veil. \*

In a state of complete detachment, he heard the police officer pronounce the names of all of them, beginning with Chief Phiri, his father, and listened as the sergeant explained that they were under arrest for murder and would start out forthwith for the campong and the jail.

On the long journey on foot over the mountains, Lepotane had but one concern—to save his father as much as he could from the roughness and fatigue of the going. With his own hands he broke a stick for him, from a dead cheche bush, to act as a staff, and, when they paused to rest, he led him to a place where there was a little soft grass under the sparse shade of a bush. Here they ate their *mofaho*, the rough food which they had been allowed to collect before setting out—stiff *papa* made from mealie-meal, and coagulated lumps of dried beans and peas, cooked to a glutinous solidity. For drink there was the water of the stream beside which



they had paused to rest and eat. The white men had gone on ahead, and they were now in charge of the native sergeant and one trooper. Seven men on a charge that involved the issue of life, in charge of two unarmed policemen. And they went quietly and submissively, without a thought to the disparity in number of their guards, without a thought of resistance or escape. For, to these people, submission to the inevitable was a natural and accepted thing. No lethal weapons were carried by the police whose patrols brought law and order into the furthest recesses of the mountains. The functioning of the law was an open city and its violation rare.

As he sat beside his father, chewing without appetite at the coarse food, he had a feeling of drifting, of losing touch with his surroundings, as though the mountains, the glitter of water, the hard, blue sky, were shedding their old, familiar skin and showing themselves as something new and alien, infinitely strange. Alone and isolated, he sat, with his father close beside him and his friends no more than a few feet away. Alone, though, in this country, no one pauses to be alone for long. All around them, heads appeared upon the sky line, rocks and trees moved suddenly into the living forms of boys and lean ribby dogs. Drawing in upon them imperceptively, attracted as by some mysterious force, the herd boys gathered to sit and stare at the eternally entralling spectacle of the unfamiliar.

A woman came down to the stream to wash her clothes. Two children splashed, naked, in the icy water

under the brilliant, mid-day sun. They tumbled and romped and looked up shyly to see if their antics were being observed. And, to Lepotane, it was as if the whole scene had a dream-like quality in no way related to reality.

The same illusion remained with him as they approached the campong whither he had ridden on a few occasions with his companions to buy goods at the trading stores or to obtain a 'pass' or '*bewys*' from the District Commissioner for stock sold to a farmer across the border in the Free State.

The campong had always seemed to him an interesting and friendly place. He had felt neither aversion nor fear when he had ridden beneath the high, stone walls of the jail on his way to an eating house which lay in the village beyond it. Many men whom he knew had served a jail sentence. They returned to the village none the worse for their experience and no one thought any less of them for having been convicted. It had been something to arrive at the campong, after a long ride, and find there food and cheer and the interest of new faces, or faces that were already known, filling one with the warmth of unexpected recognition . . .

But now it was hard to believe that the campong was the same place he had known in the past. All familiarity seemed to have been drained from the buildings, the road, the very trees that grew beside the way. All was strange, depressing, vaguely hostile. It was almost with relief that he passed through a door in the stone wall

and found himself in surroundings that were in truth strange and unfamiliar.

They had arrived in time for the last meal of the day which is eaten in the late afternoon, and were told to take their place in the long line of prisoners waiting to be served through a small window opening into the kitchen. When it came to his turn, Lepotane was handed a bowl into which had been ladled the stiff, sweet smelling *papa*, and a hot stew of vegetables.

As each man was served he broke rank and went to his own favoured corner of the court-yard, seeking out what little sun was still to be found there. A tap over a trough in the middle of the court supplied them with drink. Here too they washed their bowls and spoons before returning them through the kitchen window. Lepotane could see within the glow of fires under two great boilers which contained the food, and the sight, strangely comforting, brought with it the first positive emotion he had felt for many hours—a longing for home.

More than anything he missed the fires: the warmth, the light, the pungent smell, the curling movement of the smoke.

They were put into a large cell with walls of white-washed stone and a concrete floor. The only air came from two small, barred apertures high up in the wall, but, to these who slept habitually with doors and windows tightly shut, and heads completely covered in blankets, the cell seemed over-charged with air. There was no light except for such as came from a glass sky-

light in the roof covered with wire mesh. As night fell, this square of light grew paler, until there was nothing to be seen but a scattering of dim stars. They rolled out their sisal mats upon the floor and wrapped themselves in their own brightly coloured blankets, and the grey jail blankets which they had been given, and made a show of composing themselves for sleep. But sleep came slowly in the bare, cold room, and the restless thoughts of each of them created a constant, silent disturbance that too kept sleep at bay. But they had walked many miles and their bodies if not their minds were wearied into submission. So, as the night deepened, Lepotane heard a deepening, in breathing all around him, that is the sound of sleep. Then, at last, he too, for the first time in his life, drifted into sleep without the smell of wood smoke in his nostrils.

## CHAPTER XIV

The horizon was a high stone wall with jagged particles of broken bottle glass stuck along the top. The convicted prisoners had gone out to work in their gangs on the road, or, the least offensive of them, the man-slaughter cases who had killed a wife or lover in the moment of their passion, or a man at a beer drink when drunken humour had robbed him of reason and restraint, to work in the gardens of the Government houses. Only the prisoners awaiting trial remained behind in the flagged court-yard, sitting desultory and inactive with their backs against the western wall where the sun crept slowly downwards.

At nine o'clock the gangs in their white trousers, red and white striped jerseys, and red blankets, returned. Their heavy boots set up a clatter in the court-yard. Their voices, loud and raised, even when they spoke to those close at hand, dispelled, in an instant, the silence which had hung like smoke over the little court since their departure at six. Once again the line formed outside the kitchen window. Once again Lepotane was handed his bowl, filled to the brim with a soft, mealie-meal porridge, in place of the stiff *papa* of the evening meal. He ate, washed his bowl and went back to his place against the wall. His eyes returned to their contemplation of the horizon; the high line of stone; the

glinting splinters of glass. Overhead the sky was a hard, unbroken blue except for the flash of a bird as it streaked, for a moment, into the still, blue void and was gone. A little stir passed over the men then, a stir of interest and surprise at this evidence that the world, as they had known it, was still unchanged. 'Phakue (hawk)' they would say, or 'Khuaba (crow)' or 'Leeba (pigeon)' And the wonder of recognition was in the voice.

Otherwise they were silent—these men who, but a few days ago, had joked with each other with a light heart, and called to each other their greetings, their scraps of gossip, their comments on everything about them. Now they sat in the silence of strangers, each skinking into himself as the delicate membrane of a shellfish shrinks back into itself when it is prized from its natural habitat. It was the strangeness that divided them, the exposure to the unfamiliar, more than any weight of individual guilt or fear of what the future might hold for them.

Only Makatwane could not keep still. Where the eyes of the rest were veiled, withdrawn behind their inertia of mind and body, his own were bright and restless, roving over the sky, the prison building, the two convicts who had been left behind to repair a section of paving in the court. Several times he rose to drink water from the tap or to visit one of the two low roofed latrines that crouched in a corner under the high wall of the court. On his return from one of these excursions, he slumped down close beside Lepotane.

'When next I go to the tap,' he said softly, 'come with me. I have something to tell you.'

'Nothing you may have to say is of any concern to me,' Lepotane answered. 'Leave me in peace.'

'You will be glad enough to hear me after a few more days of this. For myself, I don't intend to remain here longer than I can help.'

Lepotane said: 'We shall all stay here until the end.'

'The end? You mean until the District Commissioner has heard the preliminary examination? After that we shall surely be dismissed.'

'We shall not be dismissed.'

'Then we shall be sent to Maseru and the case will be heard in the High Court.'

'I believe that is the way it goes.'

'Don't worry,' Makatwane said with confidence. 'If the case goes to the High Court, it will be thrown out.'

'What makes you think that?'

'Come with me to the tap and I will show you. It is a secret matter.'

'I have no wish to see,' Lepotane said wearily, and he turned away, shutting out the sight of Makatwane's face with its indecent liveliness.

When the sun had reached its zenith and begun its descent into the West, there came a movement among the men who had sat so long in motionless silence. As one man they rose and crossed the courtyard to the eastern wall and sat again, as still as the figures on a frieze.

In the late afternoon the gangs returned. Once again, the court-yard burst into life and the silence gave way to laughter and shouted conversation and the sound of running water as the prisoners washed themselves under the shower over the trough. Again the evening meal was served and eaten, again Lepotane lay stretched upon his sisal mat with his blankets wrapped about him and his eyes on the fading square of the sky-light.

So the first day ended to be followed by another and another, all of the same form and pattern. Sometimes the monotony was broken by the appearance of a new face in the prison, or one grown familiar might no longer be there. Or again, perhaps, one day, a hawk had appeared in the blue above them and, on another, a dove.



## CHAPTER XV

When five days had passed thus, something happened which had its effect on all of them and brought to one in particular, to Makatwane, an excess of high spirits, of renewed optimism and excitement. For, on the sixth day, Rapula, the witch doctor, was brought into the jail.

In spite of Phiri's intervention to withhold his name, in spite of all that had been done to shield him, the police had ferretted him out and Rapula, who had been known to cause a man's death simply by telling him that, at a given hour, he would be dead; Rapula, whom all men feared and many hated, had, in the exposure of the prison court, lost much of his awful presence; had become, in fact, after the long journey and many hours to meditate upon his plight, a shrunken, abject, frightened little man. His monkey tails, his necklaces, and all the filthy hall-marks of his trade had been removed and, with them, had gone a good deal of his sinister aspect. None the less, he was treated with respect and a place was made for him along the wall. Instinctively, Lepotane drew as far away from him as possible and, just as inevitably, Makatwane became at once his close companion. Again Lepotane was to see the curious strength that seemed to flow from Makatwane into those whom he was bent upon upholding.

Under the suave homage of his tongue, Rāpula began to grow again in stature. At first he had simply sat, slumped and dejected, passing his hand over his face with a nervous gesture, wiping it as if to wipe away the visual evidence of his misfortune. But, as Makatwane spoke to him in a low voice which the others could not hear, he sat erect and began to look about him with interest and returning confidence. Presently the two of them got up and went into a far corner of the court where they remained in earnest conversation. Though they did not raise their voices, the low, insistent murmur of them could be heard, and there was a briskness in this tide of sound, a purposeful optimism that soon communicated itself to the men across the court-yard. Heads turned curiously in their direction and the apathy of many days gave place to interest, even to new hope.

Only Phiri and Lepotane were unaffected by this spirit that had sprung up at the coming of Rapula. To them, oppressed always with the weight of their grief, there could be no hope. They were much alone now, sitting always at a little distance from the others, divided as, in truth, they had always been divided. The others might mourn a while for the chief's son, might reproach themselves secretly, for the part they had played in his death, but they could not mourn as for a son or a loved brother. They were free to seek their escape if they could, to enlist the magic of the witch doctor if it were possible. But for the father and the son there could be no easy way out. Beyond these prison walls was still the

prison of the heart. No human hand could demolish walls built of remorse and bereavement, no bolts could be drawn back, no door opened for escape. For these two there remained but one concern, one thing for which to strive, and that was the dogged preservation of their pride, the determination to meet with dignity and courage the end which they had brought upon themselves and which they accepted without hesitation or question.

And all the time the tide of suppressed excitement was rising, the atmosphere of intrigue growing more intense. Makatwane had a tautness about him as though his excitement threatened to burst through his skin. His lips, his eyes, even his nostrils seemed to be drawn into thin, tight lines by the pressure behind them. Then, as though his pent up feelings must find the relief of a new audience, he cornered Lepotane when he was alone washing at the shower.

‘Come with me,’ he urged. ‘Come over into the corner near the store room. There is no one there now. Quick! This thing is urgent.’

Because it was easier to follow than to protest, Lepotane went with him to the corner of the store houses.

‘Everything is set for tonight,’ Makatwane said. ‘Rapula is ready to get to work.’

‘If you are seeking to escape,’ Lepotane replied, ‘I would rather know nothing about it.’

‘Escape? It would not be difficult to escape from this place. But what good would it do if we did? They would catch us before we were half way home. I have

been told that our case is to be heard tomorrow and Rapula is going to see that we all get off. That is to say, I will get off. He will treat me for it was my hands that did the killing. If I get off, it follows that the rest of you must get off too. Rapula has agreed to treat me—and himself in payment. There is not enough medicine for more than that. But, used in this way, it will be sufficient to free us all.'

Lepotane did not want to ask the next question, but it came out before he could stop it—driven out by a sudden spasm of suspicion and revulsion.

'What medicine?' he asked.

Makatwane fumbled in his shirt and drew out a small zambuk tin. He removed the lid and Lepotane saw that it contained a black, viscous looking salve.

'From the medicine horn of Chief 'Phiri,' Makatwane said triumphantly. 'I rescued it from the rocks where he had thrown it. I received much praise from old Paliso, your maternal uncle, when I handed it over to him for his safe keeping until the chief returns. As you see, I took the precaution of first helping myself to a little of the contents.'

For a moment Lepotane thought that he would kill Makatwane. He felt his fingers tense with the longing to close about his throat. Then his hands went limp and fell to his sides.

'You disgust me,' he said and turned abruptly and went back to his washing under the tap.

He was deeply concerned at this new turn which

events had taken. Concerned especially for his father and how he might keep from him the sinister thing with which the coming night was threatened. He could but hope that the old man's failing strength, which had been very noticeable of late, would ensure for him the heavy death-like sleep into which he sank at night and that he would remain undisturbed by what went on in the cell.

The moon had grown to its full and its white light shone off the stone walls, lighting every corner of the cell. For a long time all had been quiet except for the deep breathing of the old man. The rest were silent, tense and wakeful, lying rigid in their blanket rolls.

At last there came a faint stirring from Rapula and instantly Makatwane could be seen sitting upright.

'Is it time?' he whispered and Rapula answered:

'It is time.'

Lepotane lay staring into the moonlit room. He saw three of the men get up and gather round Makatwane and Rapula at one end of the cell. Makatwane stood facing Rapula, and behind stood a man, and one to either side of him. He saw Rapula hand something to each of them, and, looking closely, that the object, in each case, was a spoon such as they were given daily for the eating of their food. Makatwane was stripped to the waist. He lifted his right arm and the man on that side ran the handle of the spoon down the length of it. Then Makatwane extended his left arm and the

man on the left did the same as he on the right, running the handle of the spoon down the length of it. Rapula then placed the handle of the spoon on Makatwane's forehead and ran it in a straight line down his body to the middle of his stomach. Lepotane could not see the man behind Makatwane clearly, but it seemed that he too made a movement with the spoon down the length of Makatwane's back from the base of his skull to the waistband of his trousers. Then the three men, behind and to either side of Makatwane, threw their spoons to the ground at Rapula's feet. One of the spoons spun a little wide and landed close to Lepotane's head. He saw that the handle of the spoon had been sharpened to a blade-like point, and knew then that Makatwane had been scarified. Rapula then gathered up the spoons, including that which had fallen near Lepotane. Next he held out something in the palm of his hand and the three men dipped their thumbs into it and rubbed it into the scarifications on Makatwane's body. Five times they dipped into the thing hidden in Rapula's palm and each time it was a different finger that was inserted, beginning with the thumb and ending with the small finger of the hand.

Lepotane tried not to let his mind dwell on what it was that was being rubbed into the scarifications on Makatwane's body. He heard the old man stir uneasily and saw him raise himself on one elbow and peer about him.

'What is it?' he said out loud, 'What is going on?'

And Lepotahe answered, laying his hand on his shoulder to reassure him:

'It is nothing. The men have risen to relieve themselves in the bucket over in the corner. Do not be disturbed, my father. Lie down again and sleep.'

In what manner Rapula used his share of the medicine was never known. But, when cleaning out the court-yard next day, a prisoner swept up an empty zambuk tin. He saw nothing strange in its presence there. Prisoners often collected such little treasures from the rubbish bins of the houses where they worked. Empty tins, old film spools, small particles of broken mirror glass, all were treasured for a space and thrown away again when the novelty of possession had worn off.

## CHAPTER XVI

In that state of almost hypnotic, half-awareness in which the time had passed for Lepotane since his arrest, he had seldom tried to formulate any clear picture of what the future held in store for him. But one thing was always clearly imprinted on his mind. The necessity to tell again his story of the night of the murder. He would have to tell it when they were taken before the District Commissioner for the preparatory examination and again, he never doubted, before the judge of the High Court. When he had done these two things, his part would have been played, and he could await the end without further effort—at peace within himself. Therefore, he was glad to know that the day for the preparatory examination had come, and he waited, almost with impatience, for the moment when he would be taken with the others to the courtroom at the Government offices.

But he did not go with the others. When the morning meal had been eaten, a policeman came into the prison yard and ordered Lepotane to go with him alone.

He did not like this. Separation from those whom he knew so well left him raw and exposed and, for the first time, full of nervous fears. Why was he being taken away alone? What did they want of him? How would



they seek to confuse and trouble him? He intended to speak the truth. What more than this could they expect of him? So, fearful and suspicious, he was brought to the police office where the sergeant and the police officer were waiting.

Suddenly he knew what he would do. He would keep silent. If they pressed him he would answer yes, nothing more. He would agree to everything. Then, perhaps, he would be allowed to return to the others until the case was heard.

The police officer spoke to him and the sergeant translated his words into Sesuto.

'We wish to use you as a prosecution witness. Do you agree to this?'

'Yes,' Lepotane answered.

'You will tell your story of the night of the murder just as you told it in Phiri's village?'

'Yes.'

'You understand that, in so doing, you will be used as what is known as King's Evidence?'

'Yes.'

'Do you understand the full implication of what is meant by this term, King's Evidence?'

'Yes,' said Lepotane.

He had never heard this term before. He had no idea of what it meant. But he saw that his resolution to say yes to everything had been a good one. It was plain that his answers pleased the police. He waited hopefully to hear that he could return to the prison. Instead

he was told to wait outside the court. The policeman who had brought him accompanied him outside. He stood in the sunshine and it was as if his eyes stretched themselves to take in the new wide vision of mountains and skyline after the circumscribing stone walls of the jail.

Presently he saw his father and the rest of the men approaching under escort of yet another policeman. His heart lifted. It was clear now that he had been alarmed to no purpose. All the police had wanted from him had been his assurance that he would once again speak the truth. Now he would be able to rejoin his comrades. But, when he made a movement towards the approaching men, the policeman stopped him.

'No,' he said, 'wait here. You will be called when you are wanted.' Disconsolately he watched his companions disappear into the courtroom. From inside he could hear a murmur of voices. Someone was speaking in English. The policeman told him it was the medical officer giving his evidence. After what seemed a long time, the voices ceased. A policeman came to the courthouse door and told Lepotane that he should come inside. His spirits rose, only to fall again when he found that he was to stand alone, in a small railed-in enclosure, while the others were in a similar enclosure on the opposite side of the court. The courtroom seemed to him very big and awe-inspiring. He looked with a sort of veneration towards the dais where the District Commissioner sat in a high-backed chair. The medical offi-

cer was sitting in the body of the court on one of a row of little steel chairs. Lepotane was pleased to see a white face that was not wholly strange. The medical officer had been kind to him: had given him the medicine of merciful oblivion. He looked admiringly at the stiff, white folds of his starched coat and the stethoscope sticking out of his pocket, the strange, potent instrument that could tell what was going on inside a man's breast.

He looked quickly at the District Commissioner, the *Motlatsi oa Musisi* (the one who assists the Resident Commissioner), to see what manner of man was to deal with him now. What happened, he wondered, when one stood thus in front of a magistrate? Would he be angry, impatient, accusing? Would he upbraid him for his crime? But the magistrate's face, as he looked towards him, was calm and thoughtful. He looked at Lepotane as though it were no unusual thing that a man should stand before him accused of murder. And it came to Lepotane that, while it was the first time that he had stood for judgment before a magistrate, for the District Commissioner it was part of the ordinary course of his day. Many men had stood thus before him. Yes, even men accused of murder. The magistrate's face told one that he was a man who would consider and weigh before he judged. He drew comfort from this and from the thought of all those who had stood here, in the little enclosure, before him—the curious, desolate comfort of one who sees other footprints

on the path before him, though he may have no idea of where it leads.

As he told his story, he saw that his estimation of the magistrate had been right. Many times he helped him, making things clear to the police officer when his own words had become confused, or when he wavered under the cross-examination of the prosecution because he could not understand what they were trying to get from him.

At last his story was told. The policeman who had brought him into court, opened the door of the witness box and told him he might go. Puzzled, he followed him outside. Maburu and the herd boy, Thebe, were standing close to the steps. At first he felt surprise at seeing them there. Surprise that there should suddenly appear before him these two people from an existence so far removed now that he had almost forgotten it. Then he remembered that they were witnesses in the case and would, of course, have been called in for the hearing. He greeted them briefly.

*'Eeya,'* he said as he passed them and they replied: *'Eeya.'*

They might have been strangers.

The policeman now took him to a row of rooms standing some little distance from the Government office.

*'These are the witness rooms,'* he explained. *'You may use one of them while you are waiting to be taken to Maseru for the High Court. You will be given cook-*

ing utensils and every day you will draw a ration ticket from the police. You will take the ticket to one of the stores and food will be given you in exchange for it. You may do your cooking in the open in front of the witness rooms.'

Lepotane looked at him in astonishment.

'Am I not to go back to the others?' he demanded.

'Am I not to return to the jail?'

'You are no longer a prisoner,' the policeman explained, 'but a witness. A very important witness, you understand? The other witnesses will go back to their villages, but, on the orders of the police officer, you are to remain here, reporting every day to the police when you draw your ration ticket. Otherwise you are free to move about as you please. But don't go too far,' he added warningly, 'and see you behave yourself.'

So this was his reward for having told the truth. They were determined to treat him well now until the end. He was to have a room, food, even a degree of freedom. No more stone walls, no more cold cell. A fire to cook on. A fire to sit by at night if he wished. But he would be alone. For a moment he weighed the new life offered him against the companionship of his friends and the little care and comfort he could still give to his father.

'It is very nice,' he said. 'Very nice. I should remain well so, and I thank you. But I would prefer to return to my father and my friends. I would like to rejoin them when they return to jail.'

The policeman looked at him curiously,

'That would not be possible,' he said, 'for a witness for the prosecution.'

Lepotane wrinkled up his forehead in an effort to understand but, do what he might, he could make no sense out of this new turn which events had taken.

## CHAPTER XVII

Once more his only course was to do nothing; to meet, without question, each day as it came. Report to the police, draw his rations, visit the trading stores and, at night, roll himself in his blankets and lie alone, so alone that his loneliness was like another presence in the room, until sleep brought him the comfort and companionship of dreams.

True, he saw many people when he went to the stores, but all of them were strangers. Once his longing for human concourse overcame his reserve and he made some remark to the man who was serving behind the counter, some unimportant comment on the goods handed out to him. The man showed such eagerness to continue the conversation that Lepotane felt at once uncomfortable and on guard.

'You have been coming here to draw rations for some time now,' the man said. 'When does your case come off?'

'I have not been told,' Lepotane answered.

'You are not, by any chance, one of the witnesses from Phiri's village? They tell me one of them is in camp here, a man who killed his own brother. A *liretta* murder too. That is an ugly thing, now.'

Lepotane said quickly: 'I do not know. I have not seen such a person.' And he gathered up his package

quickly and went out. He did not return to that store to draw rations, nor, at any of the others, did he make an attempt to get into conversation again.

In the daytime he sat outside the witness rooms in the sun. There was always something to watch; always people moving about round the Government offices and the white-coated figure of the doctor whom he had come, by long familiarity, to look upon as his friend, could be seen coming and going from his dispensary which was one of the buildings in the little group of buildings that clustered about the main Government offices.

But there was one day of the week when there was no activity about the Government buildings. Doors and windows were shut and confronted him blankly, like so many blind or sleeping eyes. At intervals, all through the day, the bell from the church rang out with a sweet, musical chime that pleased him, and people filed past in the road, wearing their best clothes and carrying black prayer books in their hands.

Once he decided that he too would go to the church. He had learnt something of Mamolai's religion since coming to the prison. For, though he had been listed in the prison records as a heathen, he had always attended the services held in the jail by the young Anglican priest. From him he had heard again the story that Mamolai had hinted at. The story of the man who had been God and who had come down to earth to save mankind and ensure for him a life beyond death. The



story had puzzled but pleased him. For, from the young priest's halting, and often strangely pronounced words, he had gathered that somewhere, in the blue outer space beyond this world, there was a *molimo*, a God, who cared for him, Lepotane, closely and personally. 'Even the hairs of your head are numbered,' the young priest had said. It was a beautiful thought—protective and reassuring to one who felt himself so utterly alone. Therefore, one Saturday, he washed his clothes and his blankets with extra care and spread them in the sun to bleach and dry, so that the next day he might be clean and fit to appear in the church which, so the priest had assured him, was the house of God.

The inside of the church was cold, and gloomy except for the bright pattern of the altar hangings. Already it was more than half full and, abashed and diffident, he hesitated in the doorway as he looked about him for a place to sit. A few benches, with curious, high backs, near the front of the church were still empty, but he did not care for the conspicuous isolation offered him there. Instead, he squeezed himself onto the end of a low, backless bench, right at the back of the church, which was already crowded with school children—all clearing their throats and coughing—the usual reaction to the weariness of a long wait in enforced silence.

Presently the young priest came in from a door at the back of the church. He strode towards the altar with a rustling sound made by his long, white robe. As he stood in this snowy garment with the deep colours

of the altar hangings behind him, Lepotane was conscious of a feeling of pleasure stealing over him. The whole presented a picture at once solemn and colourful. It made him feel good just to look at it. And the singing—how the church rang to the rafters with the swelling of the hymn, tuneful and joyous, its long drawn out cadences harmonised into a pattern of sound as rich and brilliant as the altar hangings.

Afterwards, while the priest read to them from a great book placed on a stand before him, he felt thankful that he had chosen a seat at the back of the church. For the reading was an exhortation to humility: to take always the lowest seat and wait until you were bidden to go up higher. That much he could clearly understand and he thought how terrible it would have been had he been sitting, alone and conspicuous, in the front seats that, apparently, belonged to more important persons. No one had come to him and said: 'Friend, go up higher,' as in the words of the reading. So clearly he was rightly placed, far back here among the children, where no one seemed to have noticed him. But hadn't they? As the service progressed and an interval of prayer was followed by more singing and another reading from the big book, he was not so sure. There was nothing of comfort to be extracted from the priest's words now. What was this unhappy tale of jealousy and violence to which he was listening? How had it crept into the teaching of hope and joy in a bright world to come, that had pervaded the service up to now?

‘And Cain,’ the priest read, ‘talked with Abel, his brother. And it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel, his brother, and slew him.’ And the priest, glancing up for a moment from his book, seemed to look directly towards him. He felt a hot tide of discomfort sweeping over him, and wished that he had not come here after all. Loneliness might be a terrible thing, but one knew where one was with it. It held no surprises; could not take one unawares. He was glad when the service ended, and he was able to escape in the anonymity of the crowd.

So he did not go to the church again. Henceforth he sought no other company than his own. And his loneliness grew in strength, a separate entity, another self, until he found himself, at times, talking aloud to it, calling it *monna*—man. ‘Man,’ he would say to his loneliness, ‘we have put too much water in the porridge to-night.’

## CHAPTER XVIII

So the days passed, piling up a solid wedge of time, so static and unchanging that it seemed it must always be thus and that the next step would never come. Yet come it did. One morning, when he went to draw his ration ticket, he was given one for a double amount of food and told to cook sufficient for the next day. For tomorrow he would be taken, in the police van, to Maseru, where, the following day, his case was to be heard. It would be as well for him to have *mofaho* for the road and enough for the night meal, for it was likely that they would arrive in Maseru late and both offices and shops might be shut.

So, that night, he cooked a quantity of stiff *papa* and rolled it into a hard, round ball which he wrapped carefully in a piece of paper which had contained his rations from the shop. That done, his preparation for the journey was complete.

He had never before travelled in a motor vehicle—not even in the *khubelu*, the big, red bus that plied between his village and the campong. At first, as the police truck hurtled along over the rough road and the country flew past at an alarming rate, he was frightened, certain that, at any moment, the tremendous impetus of their speed would be checked by a bank at the side of the road, or an ox that did not move out of the way

fast enough, or, worst of all, by another car coming suddenly round one of the blind corners. He sat stiff and erect with his eyes glued on the road ahead. But the two policemen with him, the driver and his companion, seemed quite unaffected by their obvious peril. They talked and joked with each other, shouting above the noise of the engine, as though this mad race across the earth was a normal and accepted thing. After a while their carefree attitude calmed him. If they were unafraid, it must be because they had nothing to fear. Gradually he relaxed, until he was able to enjoy the new sensation of speed; to wish even that it might never stop; that this pleasant, suspended feeling of time and space, as the road streaked away beneath them, might go on for ever.

Once they drew in to the side of the road to eat their food and stretch their legs. His own had a curious, unsure weakness. He staggered as he made his way to a place where he might find a seat and, for some time, it seemed that the whole world about him rocked a little as though it were anxious to be off again, rushing past him with a great wind of speed.

The pale light of a winter's evening hung over Maseru as they approached. It seemed to him very big and confusing with its roads and cross-roads, its buildings sprawled out to either side of the main street, some of them dwelling houses, others trading stores with their windows lit up by electricity. The windows and the street lights intrigued him. He had never imagined that

light could be so brilliant. It was like looking into the sun.

He was taken to a hut among the police houses not far from the Council Chamber where the case was to be heard. One of the police wives, out of kindness, brought him fuel for a fire and a can of thin, sour beer—*leting*. In solitude he ate his hard, round ball of porridge and washed it down with the beer. When the fire died down, he wrapped himself in his blankets and slept—a long, peaceful sleep, untroubled by thoughts or dreams. The unaccustomed journey by car had left him almost light-headed with fatigue.

## CHAPTER XIX

Within the octagonal amphitheatre of the Council Chamber, the High Court was assembled. Everyone had had time to stare at and grow accustomed to the accused in the dock, and now the focus point of interest shifted to the raised bench at which the Judge and his assessors would soon be taking their places. This bench, like the rest of the furnishing, was of solid teak. Three chairs upholstered in red leather stood behind it, the centre chair bearing the Royal Coat of Arms.

Already in their seats were the Crown Counsel consisting of the Attorney General and the European police officer who had investigated the case, and the Counsel for the Defence, a barrister and the attorney who was to assist him.

The Registrar had, a moment ago, gone out through the double glass doors, behind the Judge's bench, to ascertain if all was ready. Now he returned to his seat at a bench immediately below that of the Judge. Beside him sat the Native clerk operating the loud speakers and electrical recording machine.

Though the injunction for silence had not yet been given, an expectant hush fell upon the assembled people, both those who were to take an active part in the case and those who had come to listen, entering the Chamber through one of three doors, at the back and to either side of the octagon, and seating them-

selves on the tiers of teak benches running round its walls. Each of these entrances was guarded by a Basuto policeman and one stood on guard at either side of the glass doors, behind the bench, which led to the Judge's chambers. These two now came to attention and, with a simultaneous motion, clicking their steel spurs, flung wide the glass doors. The Court Orderly, a sergeant in charge of the exhibits, called in a loud voice: 'Silence in the Court!' and, as the police stood to attention, and the court and public rose, the Judge entered. He was followed by two European Administrative Officers, two Native assessors and an interpreter. Members of the bar turned and bowed to the Judge and, inclining stiffly from the waist, he bowed in return before seating himself in the middle chair with the Coat of Arms. The Administrative Officers then sat down on either side of him and the assessors with the interpreter moved across to a table to the left of the bench with the interpreter close to the witness box.

The Registrar turned to the Judge:

'M'Lord,' he said, 'I call the case of Phiri and seven others charged with the crime of murder—' The polished formalities came gliding out. Smoothly, with the ease of long usage, the wheel of justice began to turn. The Crown Counsel, rising, said: 'M'Lord, I appear for the Crown,' and, as he sat down, Counsel for the Defence rose to his feet.

'M'Lord, I appear for all the accused.'

The old man who was the Judge, swept the Court



with a practised eye, scarcely pausing as it passed over the faces of the eight men in the dock who faced him across the well of the Chamber. Behind the dock and to either side of it stood native police armed with loaded revolvers attached to holsters at their sides. A formality, of course. If they had had occasion to shoot, the lives of everyone present would have been in as much danger as the prisoners. Deep inside the old man, a wry smile formed itself, but not a trace of it showed on the small, grey face. The little grey hands, emerging from the scarlet folds, lay clasped together composedly, knuckle within knuckle, on the desk before him. When he spoke, the voice was dry, a little dusty.

‘Mr Registrar, will you please read the indictment to the prisoners.’

Then, calling them each by name, and beginning with Phiri and Makatwane, the Registrar began:

‘You are charged with the crime of murder, in that, upon or about the 18th day of April and at, or near, the village of Headman Phiri, you did wrongfully, unlawfully and maliciously kill and murder Simpi Phiri there residing.’

Then, to each in turn: ‘You have heard the charge. What do you plead? Guilty or not guilty?’ And from each in turn the reply came back: ‘Not guilty.’

Now the Crown Counsel rose to address the Judge:

‘M’Lord, this is a case of murder of the type usually referred to in this Territory as one of ritual or medicine murder. It will be shown that the motive in this case

is one of jealousy coupled with the desire of Headman Phiri to "strengthen" himself against the possible discovery by the police of his stock thieving practices. The first accused, Phiri, is the headman of an isolated village situated in the mountains. This village is close to a road served by a native passenger bus. Some four hours ride from Phiri's village is the cattle post where Phiri keeps his stock and, at which the deceased Simpi, his brother, Lepotane, and a herd, Thebe, were living prior to the crime. The witness, Maburu, had been employed by Phiri as his herd. It will be shown that Maburu was in love with Phiri's youngest wife, Siloane. There will also be evidence that Phiri was implicated, through his sons and Maburu, in the theft of sheep belonging to one, Musa. The police had become aware of Phiri's implication in this theft and had visited Phiri's village during the course of their enquiries. After the departure of the police, Phiri had become suspicious of Maburu whom he suspected of having given information to the police, and he was further incensed against Maburu because he had noticed that Maburu was paying court to his young wife. For this reason Phiri decided on a plan to rid himself of this menace to his domestic well-being and at the same time obtain the necessary medicine to protect himself against the unwelcome interest shown by the police. Headman Phiri decided thereupon to send Maburu on a mission to his cattle post to fetch ten sheep for a feast to be given in his village and enlisted the assistance of his second son, Lepotane, and six of

the other accused before the court, in carrying out his plan to kill and murder Maburu on his return late the following night. Before Maburu left the village, Phiri, with a show of false friendship, presented him with a striking yellow blanket, with black design, with which to protect himself against the cold on his night journey. It will be seen in this case, that the possession of this blanket was to have a startling effect upon the course of events. Maburu then proceeded to the cattle post but, being suspicious of Phiri's intentions, instructed Simpi, the eldest son of Chief Phiri, that his father had commanded him to take ten sheep to the village the following night and that his father had sent him the new blanket to wear against the cold night journey. On the pretext of being ill, Maburu returned to his own home, accompanying Simpi as far as the place where the path branched off to his own village. Simpi proceeded alone, driving the sheep. On approaching a thicket of bush through which the path ran, being mistaken, in the moonlight, for Maburu because of the blanket he was wearing, he was set upon by the conspirators, numbers Two to Seven and Lepotane, dragged from his horse and killed by having his neck twisted by number Two accused while he was being held by the other accused. At this stage parts of flesh were cut from the body of the deceased and, thereafter, the body was conveyed by numbers Three, Four, Five, Six and Seven accused to a place above a cliff where it was thrown over in order to give the impression that the

deceased had met his death by accident. It will be shown that Number Eight accused was a witch doctor to whom the human flesh was given in order that he should make strong medicine for the protection of Phiri and his fellow conspirators. The Crown case rests upon the evidence of Lepotane, an accomplice, the veracity of whose evidence is corroborated by the findings of the medical officer and the evidence of other witnesses who will be called during the course of the trial. I shall now call the first prosecution witness, the doctor who performed the post mortem examination on the body.'

In the brief pause while the medical officer stepped into the box, the Judge had time to cover a wide field of reflection.

The village, the men, the victim, different always and yet, identical. The brutal act and the brutal remedy which he was here to administer. Was it a remedy? Or was it simply retribution; at best, a hoped-for deterrent? The malady continues because it is rooted in faith, and to strike at a faith one must get at the spirit behind it. A man cannot stand on the tight-rope stretched between birth and death, across the chasm of calamity, without the bolstering of faith: something he can rely on to avert disaster. From the moment of his first cry, when he recognises in his dim, infant mind, the vessel of potential pain he is, he seeks assurance. The groping hands stretch out for the breast, the groping mind searches for a faith. The loving kindness of God; a social system that promises security; the effi-

cacy of medicine distilled from the human body. If he meets with a reverse, his faith may be shaken, but only for a time. Driven by his vulnerability, he will return again, to prayer, to the next election, to another *liretla* murder.

But, this time, we have a difference. The wrong man has been killed. And how wrong. The son. The brother. Perhaps this may be our chance to get through to them. I must speak to them.

He felt the weight of the task before him, but his old mind rose, keen and sharp, to meet it. Words and phrases began to form themselves, but he missed nothing of what was going on in the Court where the medical officer was being sworn in by the Registrar.

‘Dr Bond, will you raise your right hand and swear that the evidence you give in this court shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth—so help me God?’

From the doctor: ‘I do. So help me, God.’

*The Crown Counsel:* ‘Doctor, you are the medical officer stationed at Advance Post?’

‘I am.’

‘Did you perform a post mortem examination on the body of Simpi, the son of Phiri, at a place where the body was found below a cliff?’

‘I did.’

‘Will you describe to the court what you found as a result of your examination?’

‘M’Lord, the body was that of a powerfully built, young Basuto male aged about twenty-five years. It

was identified to me by Chief Phiri as that of his eldest son, Simpi. As a result of my examination I found that the neck of the deceased was broken. The entire skin of the abdomen was missing and, below the ribs on the right side there was a deep, gaping wound. The right lung and right kidney were missing as also were the genitals.'

*Crown Counsel:* 'From the appearance of the wounds, would you say that they could have been caused by a fall over a cliff, thirty feet high?'

*Medical Officer:* 'No. The edges of the abdominal wound were regular, and appeared to have been inflicted by a sharp instrument such as a knife. The lung and the kidney would appear to have been carefully excised by a similar sharp instrument as also the cavity left by the removal of the genitals.'

*Crown Counsel:* 'Would these wounds have caused a great deal of bleeding?'

'Yes. There would have been extensive bleeding.'

*Crown Counsel:* 'Will you have a look at this blanket, which is an exhibit before the court, and tell me whether you have examined the brown stains which appear on it?'

'Yes. This blanket was handed to me by Sergeant Tuma. I examined the stains and carried out tests which indicated that these were human blood. From further observation of the body, I found scratches about the neck, chin and back of the head. There were also abrasions on the side of the head, left shoulder and back, also along the outside of the left leg and ankle of the

deceased. There was no sign of bleeding from these abrasions which appeared to have been inflicted some time after death.'

*Crown Counsel:* 'Could these abrasions have been caused by a fall?'

'Yes.'

*Crown Counsel:* 'Doctor, as a result of your examination, to what do you attribute the cause of death?'

'To the broken neck for, from a microscopic examination of the tissues of the wounds, I came to the conclusion that these were inflicted shortly after death.'

*Crown Counsel:* 'How long before your examination would you say death had occurred?'

'Three to four days.'

*Crown Counsel:* 'Was there any sign of damaged tissue which may have been caused by animals or rodents?'

'Yes. I found that the exposed extremities of the body, the toes, fingers, and ears, appeared to have been gnawed by rodents.'

*Crown Counsel:* 'Could not the abdominal wound and removal of organs be attributed to wild animals?'

'No. The wounds were clearly incised and showed no indication of tearing or damage by animals. I hand in my post mortem report.'

He stepped out of the box to do so, passing it to the Registrar across the tomes of legal books and references which were piled on his desk. Counsel for the Defence, now rose to cross-examine the witness.

*'Counsel for the Defence:* 'Doctor, you say the neck was broken?'

'Yes.'

'Could the fracture of the neck be attributed to a fall from a high cliff?'

'Yes, that is a possibility. But the scratches below the chin and at the back of the head, together with the nature of the fractured vertebra at the base of the skull, indicated to me that the head of the deceased had been twisted.'

*Defence Counsel:* 'Would you say that the abrasions could have been caused by a fall over a cliff?'

'Yes, these are consistent with a fall.'

*Defence Counsel:* 'Doctor, you say that the extremities of the body showed signs of mutilation by rodents? Are you sure that the larger wounds of the abdominal cavity could not have been caused by larger animals such as dogs or jackals?'

'Yes. I would have expected to find signs of tearing or laceration at the edges of these wounds. These were not present.'

'Wild animals,' the Judge was thinking. 'But of course. We always have the wild animals. And the fall from the cliff—a broken neck and wild animals. That's enough now.'

'Doctor,' he interposed, 'from the appearance of the wounds, would you say that they were due to mutilation by human agency?'

'Yes, M'Lord.'



‘Thank you, Doctor. You may stand down.’

Now the man, Maburu, the intended victim. His eyes roll nervously but there is still a hint of a swagger in his walk as he steps into the box. A big fellow; good-looking in a coarse, negroidal fashion; the natural enemy of old men with young wives. What does he feel—relief? He knows now just what was lying in wait for him that night. Or is relief dwarfed by pride—pride in his own astuteness—in his proven ability to take care of himself? He tells his story with the precise, vehement candour of one who, surprisingly, finds himself with nothing to hide. The Crown Counsel puts it to him directly: ‘What do you know about the theft of Musa’s sheep?’ And the answer is equally direct; nothing held back; all that was asked and more.

‘I know that Musa’s sheep were stolen by Simpi and myself and were driven to Phiri’s cattle post in the mountains, after which I returned to Phiri’s village.’

‘When you were sent to fetch sheep from Phiri’s cattle post, were the stole sheep still there?’

‘No, they had been moved.’

‘Did you know to where they had been moved?’

‘No. I did not.’

‘Did the police ask you about Musa’s sheep?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you give them any information?’

‘Yes. I became frightened and told them that I had seen Musa’s sheep but did not know where they had been taken.’

‘Do you know Siloane, the young wife of Chief Phiri?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did she prepare food for you before you left to fetch sheep from the cattle post?’

‘Yes. She prepared my food.’

‘Was it usual for the chief’s wife to prepare food for a herd?’

‘No.’

‘Then why did she do so?’

‘I do not know.’

The eternal answer—I do not know—I have not seen—The protective covering of negation. But he’ll get it from him yet.

‘Was Siloane your lover?’

‘Yes.’

Direct question, direct answer. Only the subtleties puzzle him.

‘Before you left for the cattle post, did Siloane give you any warning?’

‘Yes. She told me that Phiri was suspicious of her relationship with me and warned me not to return as she feared a plan had been made to injure me.’

‘Did she tell you who was the instigator of this plan?’

‘Yes. She said that Phiri was the instigator.’

He won’t get away with that, the Judge thought, and already Counsel for the Defence was on his feet.

‘M’Lord, I protest. This is hearsay evidence.’ The Judge coughed.

'Learned Counsel for the Crown should not put leading questions to the witness and this part of the evidence will be expunged from the record.'

*Crown Counsel:* 'As Your Lordship pleases. Maburu, do you know the blanket, Exhibit 1, before the court?' Once again the blanket was held up by the Court Orderly.

Maburu said: 'Yes. It is the blanket given to me by Chief Phiri at the time I went to the cattle post.'

'Was that the blanket which you handed to the chief's son, Simpi?'

'Yes. I handed that blanket to Simpi.'

'What did you tell Simpi?'

'I told him that his father had sent him the blanket and that he was ordered by his father to take ten sheep to the village for a feast which his father intended to hold.'

'Did he wear the blanket?'

'Yes. Simpi appeared to be pleased with the gift. He was wearing it as I accompanied him for some distance until the path turned off to my own village.'

'When you handed the blanket to Simpi, was it in the condition in which you see it now?'

'No. The blanket was clean. There were no stains such as it now appears to have.'

So much for the Crown. Now Defence Counsel was on his feet.

'Were you an enemy of Simpi?'

'No. I always got on well with Simpi.'

‘Were you on good terms with Phiri?’

‘Yes, until he began to suspect my relationship with Siloane. Then I noticed that his manner towards me was cold, until the afternoon when he ordered me to go to the cattle post. His manner then appeared to be friendly.’

‘You have told His Lordship that Phiri instructed you to fetch sheep from the cattle post?’

‘Yes, that is so.’

‘Is it not true then that Phiri instructed you to tell Simpi to bring the sheep from the cattle post?’

‘No.’

‘What you told Simpi at the cattle post was, in fact, a lie?’

‘I was afraid to return to the village of Phiri. Also I was sick. Therefore I arranged for Simpi to go in my place.’

‘Did you suspect that harm would come to Simpi when you gave him this blanket?’

‘I did not know, but I suspected that harm would be done to me if I went back to the village of Phiri.’

‘You admit that you stole Musa’s sheep?’

‘Yes. I did so at the orders of Phiri.’

‘You are therefore a thief and a liar?’

‘I do not know.’

All this corroborated by the next witness, the young herd, Thebe. Eyes rolling white, frightened but adamant. A good witness. Yes, he knows the sheep to have been stolen by Simpi and Maburu. Yes, they were re-

moved to a cave in a valley some distance from the cattle post. Yes, Maburu had left the cattle post before the sheep were removed to the cave. The return of Maburu: the fetching of Simpi from the cave: the gift of the blanket: the setting out of the two men. Yes, Maburu had said he was sick and would return to his own village. It had been understood, from the start, that Simpi was the one ordered to take the sheep down to the village. The blanket identified again. No, there had been no stains of blood on it when last Thebe had seen it. The witness may stand down and Crown Counsel calls the witness Lepotane.

Lepotane had been waiting outside the court in the thin shade of a tree which had shed its leaves. With him was a policeman who, at the summons from the Court Orderly, led him into the court and pointed out to him the witness box in which he should take his stand.

The strangeness of his surroundings, the immensity of the chamber, the emanation of mysterious power from the old man in the scarlet robes, the curious figures gowned in black, the rows of unfamiliar faces—all went to make up a mystification that hung like a veil before his eyes. Through it action and movement could but faintly be discerned. His hands clutched the rail before him. Faintly, he heard someone speaking in his own familiar tongue, telling him to raise his right hand, making him repeat strange words. Even his own voice had a curious remote ring to it, so that it was difficult to realise that it was indeed he who spoke: 'To tell the

truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me, God.'

Now one of the black-gowned figures was on his feet addressing him, apparently, but the words came to him through the interpreter on whose face he kept his eyes fixed.

'Leopotane, where do you live?'

That was simple enough. Answer as you are asked. Stick to the bare truth and you will not get lost.

'I live in the village of Headman Phiri who is my father.'

'Do you know all the accused?'

A moment of confusion while the interpreter directs his gaze to the dock. A quick stab of emotion, whether of pain at seeing them in these disquieting circumstances, or relief at the sight of the well known faces, he does not ask himself. He notices with wonder that, round the neck of each of them, is hung a card with a large number. At the village school he learnt to read numbers up to twenty. These go as far as eight, and number one is his father. The question is repeated: 'Do you know all the accused?'

'Yes. The first accused is my father. The other accused, excepting Rapula, are all from my village. The witch doctor, Rapula, comes from the village of Linake. He is sometimes employed by my father.'

'Was the deceased Simpi your elder brother?'

'Yes.'

'Do you know the manner of his death?'

‘Yes. He was killed by mistake.’

‘Will you tell His Lordship how this came about?’

Slowly, with great care, he began to trace over the events of that night. This was the last time, he told himself. When he had told all it would be finished and he could be at peace. But no. They wanted more, it seemed, than the story of that black night. There were questions now about the theft of Musa’s sheep, about Maburu’s infatuation for Siloane, and then, lifted from the bench where he had not noticed it before, and held up for his inspection, the blanket, the mute and terrible witness to the whole affair. Next, the billy-can. Who had carried the billy-can down from the scene of the murder? Had he seen Makatwane hand it to Phiri? Had he seen Phiri hand it to the witch doctor? Then, the medicine horn. Had he ever seen this medicine horn? What knowledge had he that it had been filled with medicine brewed from his brother’s flesh?

He had not meant to tell them more than the bare story of the murder, but, led by the questions from one of the black-gowned men, he found himself telling of the scarification ceremony which had taken place in the jail.

The old Judge felt the quickening in the atmosphere. The sudden interest as Prosecution and Defence made their silent, mental pounce upon this unsuspected evidence that had come out in the course of delving after other matters. Crown Counsel was on to it at once: ‘My Lord, the evidence of this scarifying ceremony has only

just come to my notice, and I beg leave of the court to recall the medical officer to examine the second accused, Makatwane, to ascertain whether he does, in fact, bear traces of the scarification referred to by this witness. I apply for the witness to stand down in the meantime.'

The Judge murmured in the voice of long usage, sparing of effort: 'Does Counsel for the Defence have any objection to this procedure?'

'The procedure is unusual, M'Lord,' Defence Counsel replied, 'but I have no objection.'

Mystified, Lepotane was removed from the court.

'Is it finished?' he asked the policeman who accompanied him.

'No it is not finished. You will be recalled.'

The doctor re-entered the witness box and was sworn in again by the Registrar.

Crown Counsel: 'Doctor, if the second accused, Makatwane, had been scarified or cut with a sharp instrument down each arm, down the front of his body, and down the centre of his back, is it possible that traces of such scarification would be visible for a period of three weeks?'

*Medical Officer:* 'Yes, there should be traces, depending on the depth of the cuts.'

*Crown Counsel:* 'With the permission of the court I will ask the medical officer to examine the second accused in court.'

The man Makatwane was brought from the dock and his blanket and shirt removed. He stood with his



head up, his eyes averted, as though he were a thing apart from the body which he offered to the white doctor's inspection. A statue, the Judge thought. But of what? A bandit, perhaps—a troubadour—a murderer—or simply an obedient henchman of the chief? I killed because I was ordered to do so by my chief. How often had he heard that explanation for some deed of unprecedented horror? But the statue breathes. The ribs rise and fall. The torso is quite splendid. According to the dieticians he should be dead. Mealie-meal and beer—occasionally meat. It's the beer that saves them. Then his mind sprang back to attention as the man was told to resume his clothing and taken back to the dock.

The doctor returned to the witness box.

*Crown Counsel:* 'Doctor, will you please inform the court what you have found?'

*Medical Officer:* 'There are definite signs of healed scars running down each arm, down the centre of the back to the waist-line, and down the mid-line of forehead, chest and abdomen. These scars are of pencil width and, in places, are raised above the surface of the surrounding skin tissue.'

*Crown Counsel:* 'Are you able to say how old these scars are?'

'It is difficult to say.'

'Are they older than two weeks?'

'Yes. I am unable to place with any accuracy the age of the scars as they are completely healed. These

marks appear to be the marks of scarification of which I have had previous knowledge.'

*Crown Counsel:* 'Why do you say that?'

'Because the nature of the scars is irregular, a condition I would expect if any medicine had been applied to the open cuts. This would result in irregular healing.'

Defence Counsel now, for the cross-examination of the witness.

'Doctor, you say that the scars are older than two weeks?'

'Yes.'

'Might these scars be of any age—say two years old?'

'That is possible.'

'You are not able, therefore, to say definitely how long ago these scars were inflicted?'

'No.'

The seed of doubt is sown and that is all for the Defence. The doctor may stand down. Let the witness Lepotane be recalled.

He comes in again—the very young man. There is a curious, dazed look on his lean face. His movements are quick, jerky. He is warned that he is still under oath.

*Crown Counsel:* 'Lepotane, you have identified the blanket before the court which was worn by Simpi at the time of his death. Do you know what happened to the blanket?'

'After the accused, numbers Three, Four, Five, Six

and Seven returned to where Makatwane and I waited on the bridle path, Number Three accused handed the blanket to Makatwane. We then returned to the village and reported to my father, Headman Phiri. Makatwane handed the blanket to my father who took it into his hut.'

'When did you next see the blanket?'

'I saw it again in the hands of Siloane when the police were holding their enquiry in our village.'

'Did Siloane make any statement regarding this blanket?'

'Yes, she stated that she had found the blanket in my sleeping hut.'

'Was this true?'

'No. The blanket had been handed to my father in my presence.'

'Why should Siloane have made this statement against you?'

'I do not know.'

So, the Judge thought, he isn't going to help spike the guns of the Defence. What is it about this witness that makes me uneasy? He is ready to implicate father and friends but he makes no attempt to justify or excuse himself. He is given a chance to discredit his step-mother, but he lets it pass. It seems he has lost interest; that the questions harass and weary him and he has decided to run for cover—I do not know——

And I do not know either, thought the Judge, and was aware of the weariness of his own body. Suddenly

he had a vision of his own bright fireside; the flames leaping in the grate; the warm, ruby tones of the room; the gleam of the silver tea pot. He saw his wife's face, lined and old, but still alive in the eyes, those brilliant blue eyes that could light up like a girl's. He saw the high pile of her white hair, the neat patches of pale rouge on her cheek bones. She would be waiting for him, sitting in her favourite chair, surrounded by the photographs of their children and grandchildren, of friends and their children, in Singapore, in Hong Kong, in Lagos—the long record of their life together.

He said: 'The time is now four thirty and I think it would be convenient, at this stage, to adjourn until tomorrow morning at nine fifteen.'

The voice of the Court Orderly rang out as he rose: 'Rise in Court,' and he heard the glass doors behind him snap open to set him free.

Outside the court, Lepotane turned quickly to the policeman.

'Is it the end?' he asked. 'Shall I go now to the others?'

The policeman paid but little attention to this stupid fellow from the mountains.

'No,' he said, 'it is not the end. Didn't you hear the Judge say the case was adjourned until tomorrow? Remain at your hut in the police camp tonight and tomorrow. I will fetch you in good time. Don't worry, Monna. You will not be forgotten.'

## CHAPTER XX

The human mind is a highly adaptable instrument. When, next morning, he stood again in the witness box, Lepotane was no longer troubled by the confusion of unfamiliarity. Indeed, it seemed now that he knew this courtroom well, intimately, better even than the landmarks of his own home. In the brief moment before the questioning began again, he was able to take in not only the faces of his father and friends in the dock, but many others that were known to him. Faces of men from his own village sitting among the crowd of those who had come to listen to the case.

Again one of the black-gowned men was on his feet. Not the one who had questioned him yesterday, but another, and, even as he rose, Lepotane knew that there would be a difference in what he would have to face today. The first man had questioned him in the same way as the District Commissioner at the campong. He had felt that there was behind his questions only a wish to get at the truth which he, Lepotane, was willing and anxious to tell. But this other man was not like the first. He read in his eyes, in the tone of his voice, before the interpreter made his words known to him, that, in some mysterious way, he was an enemy. But why? Why should there be anyone against him now when he was prepared to give all—the truth and his life together? What more could they ask of him?

'The man addressed him by name.

*Counsel for the Defence:* 'Lepotane, you have informed His Lordship that you agreed to take part in this conspiracy engineered by your father, Phiri?'

'Yes.'

'Even though you knew that what you were doing was unlawful?'

'Yes. I must obey my father. And again I must obey him because he is my chief.'

'If your father had ordered you to kill Simpi, would you have done so?'

He had been right in the feeling that there was something bad about this man. The thing he was suggesting now was so wholly evil that he felt a shock of revulsion against his ribs like the kick of a horse. He said with a disgust that he did not think or wish to conceal: 'My father would not have given such an order.'

*Counsel for the Defence:* 'Are you sure that, in the moonlight, when you gave the signal for the others to seize the deceased, you did not know that the rider was your brother Simpi?'

What did this man mean? Was he suggesting that he had wilfully killed his brother? He felt the blood beating in his temples as he replied: 'I did not know that it was Simpi.'

'With Simpi dead, you would be your father's heir?'

Ah, that was Siloane. He had heard this foul implication before. He wanted to shout at the man as he had shouted at her, but his voice remained low and steady.

Only his hands, gripping the rail, tightened a little.

'Yes. But I would not have harmed Simpi who was my friend and my chief.'

'A witness, Siloane, will say that you wished your brother's death in order that you might succeed to the chieftainship.'

'That is a lie.'

'This blanket before the court which was worn by Simpi at the time of his death was later found in your hut.'

'I do not know this. It was handed by Makatwane to my father, Phiri.'

'How came it to be in your hut?'

'I do not know, unless it was taken there by some person who wished me evil.'

'Was there any ill-feeling between Siloane and yourself?'

'There had been a quarrel between us. I blamed Siloane for my brother's having come in Maburu's place. I knew that she was Maburu's lover. I suspect that Siloane has tried to put the crime on me alone by placing the blanket in my hut.'

That's not the answer he wanted, the Judge thought briefly. Pity he didn't leave that one alone. But he drops it quickly.

'You say you recognise this billy-can. Are there not many similar to this in Phiri's village?'

'Yes, there are similar ones in the village, but I recognise this one by its bent handle and the dent in its lid.'

It belongs to my father and is one which I have often handled. It is the billy-can used on that night to contain the flesh cut from my brother's body.'

That, apparently, was all that was wanted of him. He was told to stand down and take his seat beside Maburu and Thebe on a bench to one side.

The woman who now entered the box was a stranger but it was soon apparent that this was Maburu's other love, the woman who had opened her door to him on the night of the murder. They did not require much of her: simply her statement that, at some time during that night, she had no means of knowing what time, but it was later than sunset and certainly before dawn, Maburu had knocked and been admitted to her hut. He had told her that he had come home because he feared a plot against his life by the men of Phiri's village.

Next came the small herd who had led them to the site of the body. In a voice made faint with fear, he told his story of the finding of the body by himself and his younger brother, and how they had run all the way to Phiri's village to give the alarm because they knew that their master would be there to join in the feast of Chief Phiri.

Then it was the turn of the sergeant who had come to the place where the body lay, in answer to a report made to him by the messengers of Chief Phiri. Yes, he had been present at the post mortem at the place where the body was found. Afterwards he had gone to the village of Maburu and returned to Phiri's village ac-



accompanied by Maburu. He had taken charge of the blanket which was produced by Siloane. It appeared to have blood stains. He had handed the blanket to the medical officer for tests to be carried out. The blanket was later returned to him. Yes, he had been present in Phiri's village when Lepotane had admitted that he had taken part in a conspiracy by Headman Phiri and others to kill Maburu. He had arrested the named men and charged them with the murder of Simpi. Later he had gone to the village of Linake where, in the hut of the witch doctor, Rapula, he had found the billy-can which was identified by Siloane as belonging to Headman Phiri. He had arrested the witch doctor on the charge of being an accessory after the fact. At his orders police had carried out a search in the neighbourhood of Phiri's cattle post and had recovered Musa's stolen sheep in the valley indicated to him by Lepotane and Thebe.

'M'Lord, that concludes the case for the Crown.'

*From the Judge:* 'Mr Interpreter, inform the accused that the evidence for the Crown is now closed and they are at liberty to do one of three things. They may either say nothing, for the Crown must prove its case; or they may make a statement from the dock, in which case they cannot be cross-examined; or they may give evidence as witnesses on their own behalf, in which case their evidence will be given under oath and they will be subject to cross-examination. Before doing any of these things they are advised to consult their counsel, if they have not already done so.'

‘*Counsel for the Defence*: ‘M’Lord, the accused have consulted me regarding this matter, and they have decided not to make any statements. I propose, however, to call the woman, Siloane.’

Siloane came in holding her head very high on her long, silky neck, but she kept her eyes cast down and her expression was a curious mixture of pride and abjection. Her voice, as she took the oath, was so faint that she could scarcely be heard.

*Counsel for the Defence*: ‘You are the junior wife of Chief Phiri?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you sleep in the same hut as Phiri?’

‘No. I have a separate hut of my own.’

‘Have you had any children by Chief Phiri?’

‘No—but I am expecting one.’

‘Where were you at the time of Simpi’s death?’

‘I was at home.’

‘Shortly before Simpi’s death, had you gone to Advance Post?’

‘Yes. I had gone to buy a new blanket.’

‘Is that the blanket in court?’

‘Yes, I see it in the court.’

‘To whom did you give the blanket on your return?’

‘To my husband, Phiri.’

‘Did Phiri keep the blanket?’

‘No. He gave this blanket to Maburu, his herd, when he sent him to the cattle post to fetch sheep.’

‘When did you see this blanket again?’

'I found it in Lepotane's hut a few days after Maburu left for the cattle post.'

'Did you remove this blanket from the hut?'

'Yes, I took it to my own hut, intending to wash it as I saw that it appeared to be dirty.'

'Did you wash it?'

'No. When the police came and Phiri accused Maburu of the death of Simpi, I produced the blanket for I heard the police asking where this blanket was, and I told the police I had found it in Lepotane's hut.'

So this man, the evil one, and Siloane had perfected the story of the finding of the blanket in his hut. But now the other, the one who seemed to be on his side, had risen and was addressing Siloane with much the same look, the same tone of voice, as the evil one had employed against him.

*Crown Counsel:* 'Siloane, you are the chief's wife?'

'Yes.'

'You were friendly with Maburu?'

'Yes.'

'Before he left for the cattle post, is it a fact that you prepared food for him?'

Siloane said nothing.

'Answer me. Did you or did you not prepare food for Maburu?'

Then, reluctantly: 'Yes, I did so.'

'Is it not true that before leaving for the cattle post, Maburu entered your hut and remained there with you for some time?'

“Again Siloane was silent.

‘Siloane you are here to speak the truth. I ask you, is it not true that Maburu entered your hut?’

‘Yes, it is true.’

‘I put it to you, Siloane, that Maburu was your lover.’

‘No, he was not my lover.’

‘In that case, Siloane, is it the custom for the chief’s wife to prepare food for a herd employed by her husband?’

‘It is not the custom, but I did so.’

‘Are you at present with child?’

‘Yes, I have said so.’

‘Is not Maburu the father of this child?’

‘No. Phiri is the father.’

‘Whose duty is it to attend to the cleaning of Lepotane’s hut?’

‘The young men clean their own hut.’

‘What reason did you have for entering Lepotane’s hut after the death of Simpi?’

‘I went there.’

‘If it was not your duty to clean this hut, why did you go there?’

Again the stubborn repetition.

‘I went there.’

‘I put it to you that you never went to Lepotane’s hut.’

‘I do not know.’

‘Is it not true, Siloane, that you found that blanket when you were cleaning Phiri’s hut?’

‘Yes, it is true.’

‘Why then, did you say you found it in the hut of Lepotane?’

Siloane put on her virtuous face. Her words came out mincingly.

‘I did it to protect my husband. I did not want to make trouble for him.’

‘Siloane, do you know this billy-can?’

‘Yes. The billy-can belongs to my husband, Phiri.’

‘How do you know it?’

‘I recognise it because of a certain dent in its lid. It is one I know well.’

There was no re-examination from the Defence and Crown Counsel rose to address the court.

‘M’Lord, I do not propose to address the court at length, because the evidence of Lepotane is quite clear. His evidence is that of an accomplice, but I contend that it is credible beyond any reasonable doubt. In all important points it has been corroborated by the evidence of Thebe, in regard to the theft of Musa’s sheep; by Maburu regarding the substitution of the blanket which has played so great a role in this case; by the police sergeant in regard to the billy-can which was later discovered in the possession of the witch doctor, Rapula, and finally, by the evidence of the medical officer which bears out his evidence regarding the cutting and removal of certain parts from the body of the deceased, Simpi. M’Lord, I draw attention to the straight-forward manner in which Lepotane has given his evidence in this court. I also draw attention to the

fact that the blanket was never discovered in the hut of Lepotane after the death of Simpi, but that this subterfuge was resorted to by Siloane for the reasons which she has been reluctantly compelled to admit, before Your Lordship, for the purpose of trying to shield her husband, Phiri, from the consequences of this conspiracy to cause the death of Maburu, but which, in fact, was instrumental in causing the death of his son and heir, Sirapi.

'M'Lord, a murder has been committed' and it is not necessary for me to inform Your Lordship that, where it is intended to kill one person and another is killed in his stead, the law does not absolve the perpetrators of this act from the consequences that follow therefrom.'

Truly a right and just man, Lepotane thought, and then was made uneasy again to see that the other was now on his feet. What could this man have to say in the face of the clear truth so well put by the first?

'Your Lordship and gentlemen the assessors,' Counsel for the Defence began, 'it is necessary, under our law, that the Crown should prove the guilt of the accused beyond any reasonable doubt. In this case, Your Lordship is aware that the Crown case rests upon the evidence of the accomplice, Lepotane. It is his evidence and his alone which connects all the accused with the crime. Under the law of this Territory, it is competent for this court to convict on the single evidence of an accomplice, provided that the offence has, by competent evidence, other than the single and unconfirmed

evidence of the accomplice, been proved to the satisfaction of the court to have been actually committed. It is a well-established practice for the court to warn itself against accepting the evidence of an accomplice, as it is recognised that such witnesses are in a peculiarly advantageous position to concoct evidence and implicate persons so that such evidence, through their intimate knowledge of the crime, is able to fit the circumstances of the act.

‘We have here the second son of the first accused who stands to gain everything by the death, not only of his father, Phiri, but also of the heir standing between him and the chieftainship.’

Again the hideous, unreasonable lie. If it had been possible to believe the evil thing this man would make him out to be, surely he stood absolved by his own confession? He had never attempted to conceal his part in the murder. Death must follow as surely for him as for the others. Why then should this man be permitted to stand there and attempt to dishonour him before this court? Happily those closest concerned, his father and the men with him, would know these utterances for the lies they were. But there were others, the men from the village who knew nothing about the murder, would they look at him and see the murderer of his own brother, the crafty destroyer of his own father? It seemed there was no end to the foul imputations the man in black was concocting against him.

‘Is it not possible,’ he was asking, ‘that Lepotane

has taken this opportunity to rid himself of those persons standing between him and his ambitions? Then again, we have the infatuation of Maburu for Siloane, the young wife of Chief Phiri. It is not beyond the bounds of reason that, both he and Lepotane standing to gain by the elimination of Chief Phiri, they may have contrived this murder between them. We know that Maburu was the last man seen with Simpi while Simpi was yet alive and his reasons for failing to carry out the order he had had from Phiri are not wholly satisfactory. Lepotane admits that he returned with Makatwane to the village after the murder and that the blanket was in the possession of Makatwane at that time. Your Lordship will note that all the accused have denied their guilt. The only person whom we know for certain to have taken part in the killing of Simpi was, in fact, Lepotane. Could he not then have placed the blood-stained blanket in Phiri's hut, without his knowledge, hoping thereby to implicate Phiri? We have the confused statement of Siloane in which she would appear to have placed the blame on Lepotane. I maintain, My Lord, that it is extremely dangerous to accept the evidence of such an accomplice where there are so many factors advantageous to himself, and I ask Your Lordship to hold in favour of the accused that the Crown has not proved its case beyond reasonable doubt. For doubt there must exist and it is only right that the accused should be given the benefit of this doubt. I ask, therefore, for the acquittal of all the accused.'



Of all except me then, Lepotane thought. So that is what this man has been aiming at. To throw the entire blame upon me. But why? Because I alone was prepared to speak the truth? Surely, this is a strange, hard place in which I find myself. I do not ask to live—but to die alone—And he felt the ice of his long courage melt within him and, for the first time, he was afraid.

The old man in the scarlet robes was speaking.

‘I propose now to adjourn and to sum up to my assessors in Chambers. I will give my judgment in this case tomorrow morning at nine o’clock.’

‘What was the meaning of what the Judge said?’ Lepotane demanded of the policeman as soon as they got outside.

‘Man, don’t you listen to anything? Didn’t you follow the interpreter at least? The Judge said that he will now think over the case and talk about it with the assessors, and, tomorrow morning, he will give his judgment.’

‘It will all be over then? We will know——’

‘Yes,’ the man replied. ‘Tomorrow you will know.’

So, it had come at last. Tomorrow he would be dead. For he supposed, in his ignorance, that execution followed immediately upon condemnation. He sat a long time outside his hut that night, long after it was dark and the cold of frost congealed about him. He sat there, simply staring up into the sky. It was a clear night, full of stars, and their white, winking brightness seemed to pulsate against the black. Like a heart beating.

## CHAPTER XXI

When the Judge referred to the great books before him, citing the strange, involved terms of the law, Lepotane, even with the interpreter making a valiant attempt at translation, could find not the remotest thread of meaning. Yet, as the analysis of the evidence continued, out of the confusion of legal terms and references, it became clear that the Judge was leading up to something, and that that something was the common guilt of all who had been involved in the murder of Simpi—even of Phiri, who had lent no hand in the actual killing, but had been far away, asleep at the side of Siloane, when it took place.

So, Lepotane thought, the man who was his enemy had not succeeded in his design to place the murder upon him alone. He would not be separated, in death, from his father and friends. For there was no doubt in his mind now as to what the sentence of the Judge must be.

But the Judge did not pass sentence at once. Before doing so, he said he wished to speak to the accused and to all those who had come to listen to the case. He spoke slowly, and his words were carefully translated by the interpreter. This time it required no effort to understand his meaning. His words went close to the heart of Lepotane, so that it was with difficulty that

he refrained from nodding his head or making an ejaculation of agreement. All that the Judge said was so true; so painfully, hopelessly true now that the deed was done and it came too late to save Simpi or the fools who had brought about his death.

'Before passing sentence on these men before me,' the Judge said, 'I want to say a few words to them and to all those Basuto here in this court who have come, day after day, to listen to this case. I hope that, when those not concerned in this affair return to their villages, they will remember my words and pass them on to others that they may travel through the nation; so that, if any one of you should find himself faced with the problem of committing a brutal murder or incurring the anger of him who demands it, you will not lack for courage or hesitate in making your choice.'

'During the past week, there has been revealed in this court the story of a crime that has not made pleasant hearing. The evidence has been such that there can be no doubt in the mind of anyone who has followed the case that, on the 18th of April of this year, this foul and brutal murder was committed by the men who stand before me in the dock. In other walks of life one would look for the perpetrators of such a crime among the habitual criminals of what is termed the underworld, or those unbalanced in mind by mental disease, or the violent emotions of jealousy, rage or grief. Certainly one would not expect to find them among the ordinary, decent citizens who, normally, go about

their day to day business of life, quietly, and lawfully. Yet, here is Phiri, a chief of good repute. His ward is peaceful and orderly. He has been chief for thirty years.

'Lepotane, the Crown witness, who has himself given us an unshakable account of the crime, is a young man of high standing. He is known to be responsible, disciplined and courteous as befits the son of a chief.

'Phetla is a regular attendant at the Mission Church. He is a quiet man, a hard worker, a good husband and father.

'Lefa, the Chief's Messenger, was at one time a clerk in Government employment. His conduct was always satisfactory. He is a man of some education.

'Makatwane and Ndala are young men of spirit, but nothing is known to the detriment of their characters. The same can be said of the other two men.

'Yet, at a word from Phiri, these men go out without question or protest, and carry out a crime of a nature which might have caused the most hardened criminal to flinch. What can inspire this spirit of cold-blooded brutality, this indifference to human suffering, this violation of the code of decency in every race and creed?

'A man does not shed his beliefs easily. These men, and others like them, believe in the power of medicine prepared from human flesh. I am not going to dispute this belief. To those who stand centuries ahead in scientific knowledge, in a civilised social code, and that simple code of human decency embodied in the life

and teaching of Christ, such a belief is as foolish as it is repugnant. Nevertheless, we have to recognise its existence among men who have yet to throw off this horrible shackle of barbarity. What I would point out and emphasise is, that belief in the potency of this medicine in no wise justifies or excuses the atrocities which take place in order to obtain it.

‘Let us consider the motive behind these crimes, the advantage they are supposed to bring. A man wishes to increase his political power. What does this mean but that he ultimately hopes to acquire some material good, to become more wealthy, to have a better life, more food in his stomach, more beer in his pot; perhaps to gain an advantage in love, or to escape the just punishment of some crime? He wants, in fact, to make life smooth and pleasant for himself. Is this such a high and worthy aim that it justifies the taking of another’s life by brutal and horrible means? Is he any better than the cannibal who assuages his hunger with human flesh? Is there no other way in which he can get about trying to procure these advantages? Some way that does not entail the inhuman infliction of pain and death or carry with it the risk of the noose? Look about you. Who are the chiefs who enjoy this material well-being? Have they carried out murders which have gone undetected by the police, or has prosperity followed always upon industry? I think you will find that it has been the latter. The man who ploughs in time and tends his fields, reaps. The man who takes care of

his own flocks and does not covert those of another does not go to jail for stock-theft. The man whose own character is above reproach does not lack for friends or loyal followers. His orders are obeyed; he is respected. *Liretla* is the recourse of the weak, the inadequate, and those who wish to obtain something to which they have no lawful claim. If Phiri had not sought to enrich himself with Musa's sheep, there would have been no *liretla*.

'And what of the men who carry out the crime according to the instructions of such a man? What evil enters into them so that they cease to feel as compassionate human beings, and are able to perpetrate, in cold blood, such deeds as you have heard tell of in this court? Do not these men consider it a crime for a man to enrich himself by the murder of another? They are blindly obeying their chief and that should be a virtue. But obedience is only virtuous when it carries out such orders as are lawful. I speak not only of the law as it is written in these books before me, but of the law of God which tells us clearly that we shall do no murder. It is this law which protects each one of you and every time you break it, you weaken that protection. Those who kill today may be victims tomorrow. When death is set afoot, no man can tell for certain where it will strike. Chief Phiri set death afoot and the victim was his own son. Do you not see a terrible justice in this mistake? He stands now in the woeful position of every father or mother or husband or wife or child

whose loved one has been hideously sacrificed in a *liretla* murder. He did not intend to kill his son, but he set death afoot and he is the killer of his son. So also these men, though the victim was not the one they intended to kill, are no less guilty of murder.

‘Anyone who lends himself to the taking of life is a murderer, whether he lifts his hand against the victim himself, or assists the hand of another, or fails to try to restrain that hand, he is a murderer. In this case, the greatest culprit of them all, Chief Phiri himself, was not even present at the scene of the crime. But, as its instigator, his is the greatest guilt.’ Not only the life of his son, but the life of each of these men, is upon his head.

‘Before any of you would strengthen himself by this hideous and unlawful means, count the cost. Ask yourselves if the doubtful advantage which you hope to gain is worth finding yourselves in the position of these men today.’

There was no sound in the court when the Judge finished speaking. Then, one by one, beginning with Chief Phiri and omitting only the name of Rapula, he called upon the accused to rise and, in solemn tones, pronounced his sentence upon each of them.

‘I find you guilty of the crime of murdering Simpi Phiri and I call upon you to say why sentence of death should not be passed upon you.’

Surely, Lepotane thought, I should have been called to stand with them now? He looked questioningly at

the policeman beside him, but the policeman was looking straight ahead. He took no notice of the slight movement of agitation from the man beside him.

Alone of the prisoners, old Phiri now indicated his desire to speak. What was this? Did his father intend to defend himself, to offer excuse or justification for his act? Fervently he hoped that this would not be so. For he felt that, for his father or himself to seek forgiveness or escape would be the ultimate treachery to his dead brother.

But it was not to plead for his life that the old man spoke and Lepotane felt a glow of pride as he listened to his clear, unwavering words.

'The Judge has spoken of my guilt. I do not understand why he insists that I am guilty of my son's death. To be guilty of death you must wish it with your heart and carry it out with your hands. I am not afraid to die, but I do not like to hear it said of me that I am the killer of my son. I did not kill my son. Neither with my hands nor in my heart. I loved my son and I am eager to rejoin him. I shall enter heaven—running.' And he made a quick, virile movement of his head as though, already, he had begun to run.

So solemn and pictorial were the next words of the Judge that Lepotane felt his heart grow weak. It was as though he saw the rope round the neck of each of the condemned men and felt it press against his own.

'You will be hanged by the neck until you are dead. And may the Lord have mercy on your souls.'



The condemned men were told to sit again and Rapula was called upon to stand. The Judge had some hard things to say of this old man who kept alive the evil superstitions of a race striving upwards to civilisation. He told Rapula that he was fortunate indeed that he did not stand among the condemned, where many might rightly feel his place to be. As one who had known that the murder was contemplated and had said nothing, but had instead encouraged its course by his willingness to prepare medicine from human flesh, he was found guilty of being an accessory after the fact and sentenced to ten years.

Ten years, Lepotane thought. Ten years of stone walls and glittering glass and the square of blue sky. And it seemed to him that the freedom of death would be preferable to this.

The court rose and, escorted closely by the police, the prisoners were marched out of the door at the back of the court. They went out quickly, their eyes fixed straight ahead, not a ripple of emotion disturbing the drained blankness of their faces. Only Makatwane still looked this way and that, walking with the springy gait of his assurance, still confident, still buoyed up by his crazy belief in the medicine.

Lepotane could no longer restrain himself. Turning to the policeman beside him, he said: 'But I am one of them. I too have been condemned to death by the Judge—why do I not go with the others?'

The policeman looked at him in astonishment.

‘Did they not explain to you that if you gave evidence for the Crown you would be set free? Surely you understood the implication of turning King’s Evidence?’

King’s Evidence, he had heard that term before. His mind flew back to the scene in the police office at the campong. He heard himself answering—yes—to everything. What should he do now? What could he say to explain his ignorance?

‘They explained to me, yes,’ he said, ‘but I did not rightly understand. Please tell the Judge I wish only to go with the others. I am as guilty as they are. I explained that to the court.’

‘Look, my poor, simple fellow, you had better say nothing more. After all, you are free. That is something, surely?’

‘With my brother dead—my father hanged—what shall I do with this freedom?’

‘That is for you to work out,’ the policeman said enigmatically. ‘From now on that is your problem. My instructions are to put you on the *khubelu* bus and send you back to your village.’

Then, as Lepotane opened his mouth to protest, ‘Don’t worry. Your ticket will be paid for by the Government.’

It was useless. There was nothing he could do. Now, for the first time, the knowledge that his father and his friends were to lose their lives rushed over him in unendurable pain. His throat constricted and he felt that he would weep again—the loud uncontrolled

weeping that had seized him over Simpi's body. But that must not happen here. There were too many strangers to witness his weakness. He held on to himself, sweating, so that the beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead and the palms of his hands grew moist and cold.

Outside he was joined by Thebe and Siloane. The boy was shivering with a mixture of nerves and cold. Siloane wore her most impassive face.

'You three are to be put on the *khubelu* and sent back to Phiri's village,' the policeman said. 'The man Maburu, and the other witnesses will go back to their own homes. Quick now, and I will show you where you may catch the bus. It leaves in a few minutes.'

The bus was already nearly full and they were unable to sit together. Lepotane was glad of this. He did not wish to look at the frightened boy or the false, mask-face of his step-mother. If he could have had his way he would never have looked again at a single known face. He longed to creep away like a sick animal—to find some obscure, hidden cave in his own mountains and quietly lie down and die.

The other passengers on the *khubelu* were in high spirits. They talked and laughed and sang, beating time by leaning out of the windows and striking the sides of the bus with their open palms. He sat, sunk deep within himself, his heart filled to breaking and wondered if ever, through the long history of time, there had been a man more unhappy than himself.

## CHAPTER XXII

The *khubelu* was eating up the miles. Not at as rapid a rate as the police van which had taken him from the campong to Maseru, but fast enough to make his head feel light and empty.

He was going home—that should have brought him some comfort. But was he? Could there still, for him, be the village and the life he knew so well? Or would he find there the same strangeness, the same cold, alien quality that had seemed to slip over his familiar world from the moment he had known Simpi to be dead?

If he could have followed his thoughts, leaping ahead of the bus, he would have found the village changed in more than atmosphere. It was just such a bright, sunny afternoon as that on which he had come down from the mountains carrying the empty *phofo* sack<sup>1</sup> with a light heart. But, today, no smoke hung above the village. There was no movement from hut to hut, no sound of voices on the crisp, clear air. The village was almost deserted. A few children played in the sand in the sunshine and, in a reed enclosure in front of one of the huts, two old men sat hunched in their blankets. One of them was Paliso, Simpi's maternal uncle, and the other Sekaka, an old man of no particular standing. With the peculiar detachment of

the aged, they sat and smoked, pulling at their short pipes and blowing out the sweet smelling tobacco smoke in a blue haze about their heads.

Presently Paliso spoke.

'They should be back soon,' he said. 'This will be the third day of the hearing.'

'It will be good to see men about the village again,' Sekaka said. 'Most of them have gone to Maseru that they might ride back with the Chief. I would like to look up now and see them advancing over the horizon. I like nothing better than the sight of a body of horsemen riding with their chief.'

Paliso said: 'I have fears that Phiri will no longer be the same man we knew. He walked like an old man when he left here—he who was always as upright as a reed. His grief for Simpi was like the sudden onslaught of disease. He reproached himself in his heart for the death of his son.'

After a pause, as though he did not care to give voice to the thought that had struck him, Sekaka said: 'If the disease should prove fatal—what then?'

'The young man, Lepotane, will be chief.'

'What sort of chief will he make—a man who loses his head at the approach of the police and blurts out the whole story?'

'He wished only to jump into Simpi's grave. There was great love between the brothers.'

'How will he deal with Siloane if he should become the chief? There will be no love lost between those two

after her trying to accuse him of the wilful murder of Simpi.'

'Siloane is a snake, and a snake can take care of itself.'

'If things go badly at the court, her son will be the heir.'

Paliso ejected a long, brown stream of saliva.

'Maburu's bastard,' he said disgustedly.

'But a child of the third hut just the same,' Sekaka reminded him. 'Siloane would not be sorry to find herself the mother to the Chief's heir.'

Paliso regarded him coldly.

'What is this talk,' he asked, 'of things going badly at the court? Phiri will win his case. Rapula has assured it.'

Sekaka said hastily: 'I do not suggest doubt. I, like you, am quite certain that the case will end favourably. After all, is not Rapula there himself to see that things go well?'

But discomfort had crept upon them at this reminder that the omnipotent Rapula had not been able to save himself from going to jail like any common man.

The silence of their discomfiture was broken by the sound of the bus vibrating through the stillness.

'The *khubelu*,' Paliso said, glad of an excuse to resume the ease of conversation and Sekaka echoed: 'Yes, the *khubelu*.'

They rose, moved by a common curiosity, and went outside the enclosure to get a better view of this their

only link with the outside world—the passing three times a week of the red bus which plied between the village and Maseru, passing through their own camp on its way. Sometimes it stopped to allow a passenger for the village to alight, and this occurrence, by its very rarity, gave an additional interest to the day. They waited, curious as children, to see if it were going to stop.

‘Yes,’ Paliso said with satisfaction, ‘yes, it is stopping right enough. And someone is getting down. It looks like Lepotane, and there is a woman with him and a boy. But I must be mistaken. Lepotane would not come without the others—and by the *khubelu* at that. Horses were taken to Maseru by our men to be in readiness for Phiri and the seven men with him. But it is Lepotane. Now what can be the meaning of this?’

They stood watching the three figures, and especially Lepotane as he made a shuffling, stumbling descent upon the village. He came towards them muttering to himself and shaking his head. It seemed that he was scarcely aware of his surroundings or the two old men. When he was close to them, Paliso went up to him. He saw that his face, peering out from the shadow of a lace-like grass hat, was wild-eyed and distracted. He caught him by the arm.

‘What is this?’ he asked. ‘What is the matter. Where are the others?’

Under the fire of his questions, Lepotane seemed to come back from a long distance. His eyes slowly cleared and focussed themselves upon the old man’s face.

"They gave me a ticket and put me on the *khubelu*," he said. "They told me I should return to my home."

"And where are the others?"

"They were taken from the courthouse by the police. I did not see where they went."

"By the police? Do you mean they were convicted?"

A dizziness seized Lepotane. He staggered round with his head hanging as though he were searching on the ground for something. Then, appealing to the old man, he cried: "Why am I here? Why did they send me away?"

Paliso caught him by the arm and shook him.

"Speak out," he demanded. "What has happened to the others? Are they to be hanged?"

Lepotane swallowed with a gulping sound. He tried to speak but no sound came from his throat. Dumbly he nodded his head.

"And you are free?" Sekaka asked.

The two old men looked at each other, a look of suspicion and significance. Lepotane fumbled in his pocket and drew out a sheet of paper. It was crumpled and damp from the sweat of his body.

"They gave me this," he said, "and a ticket for the *khubelu*."

Paliso snatched it from his hand.

"A certificate of exemption," he sneered. "So, you spoke for the Crown? You gave evidence against your own father and your friends? I have known rats like



you before. King's Evidence, they call them. They speak against the others and themselves go free. Your father must be proud of you, Lepotane.'

. Lepotane said miserably: 'I do not understand this thing: I spoke what was the truth. I did not ask to be set free.'

'Didn't you, Lepotane. Can it be that Siloane was right after all? Who stood between Lepotane and the chieftainship? Who gave the signal for the attack on the man wearing the blanket? Who said that he did not recognise the man as his own brother until it was too late? Who told the whole story to the police and testified to the guilt of his own father and his six friends? Chief Lepotane, I greet you. Take this. It belongs to you. You will have need of it.' And he held out Chief Phiri's medicine horn. Lepotane drew back, but Paliso seized his hand and closed the nerveless fingers round the little black horn.

He stood there, guilty and ashamed, as though the words of Paliso had been true. Somewhere, at the back of his mind, he knew that it was all false. He had never plotted or willed the death of his brother. He would gladly have given his own life for him if it had been required. Yet he stood here in his guilty freedom, and what Paliso said sounded reasonable enough. He would have believed it had it been said of anyone else in similar circumstances. How then should he ever come to terms with this terrible freedom? It would have been easier, less painful, to have let them place the noose about his

neck and to have fallen a few feet into the all-embracing blackness of death.

A terrible loneliness seized him. He felt a desperate longing for peace, for comfort, for the kindness of love and fellowship. But where should he ever find it again? The eyes of the two old men were hard as flint. Would all eyes look at him like this from now on?

Suddenly Siloane burst into loud, ululating sobs. The anger of the old men against Lepotane had given her her cue, and, like the accomplished actress that she was, she seized upon it instantly. The bereaved widow wept aloud and, as though quite thrown out of balance by grief and outrage, made a weaving, stumbling run for her own hut.

Lepotane looked about him in despair and there, far in the distance, stark against the blue sky, he saw the little wooden cross of the Mission Church. He began to run, stumbling and uncertain towards it. The church; would he not find peace there? And love? The young priest had assured him of the love of God. Alone in the cold, dark church, he would surely find what he was seeking with this burning longing akin to physical thirst.

But he was not to be alone in the church after all. As he drew nearer he could hear the sound of singing and the thin, nasal whine of the harmonium. Mamolai's hymn—

*Jesus, lover of my soul—*

There were only a few people in the church, most

of them women, but, once again, he crept in quietly to the very back of it. As his eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom, he saw that a marriage ceremony was taking place. The bride and groom were standing before the altar and the priest was speaking the words which pronounced them man and wife. The girl was wearing a long white dress of some gleaming material and a white veil hung almost to her feet. Suddenly he recognised her. Mamolai. And the man beside her, in the neat, dark suit, was the schoolteacher.

He had been so certain that he would never see her again, had so completely relegated her to that happy life which had ended abruptly with Simpi's death, that it was with a shock of surprise that he recognised her, as though he had been confronted with a ghost from some long vanished past. How painfully he was taken back into that past now. He could almost see the flash of her knitting needles in the sun, the gleam of her shiny brown legs. He heard again her little clipped voice making its assertion: 'I shall be married in a church. And I shall wear a white dress and a white veil.' Well, that much at least had been given to her. Let her have her moment of happiness. Only too soon it would be clouded by the news of her father's death.

But what sort of comfort was this? His heart was filled with a new sense of loss, a new desolation. Mamolai, how he had loved her. Did anything of that love remain? Or had it long since been consumed in the fire of his anguish? It was not the losing of Mamo-

laid to the schoolteacher that filled him now with sorrow, but the memory of a love that had burned so brightly and of which not a trace remained.

He got up and hurried out of the church. The medicine horn was still clutched tightly in his hand. He looked down at it and it was as if, in that moment, someone called to him.

He knew now where he must go, where he would find that which would ease his heart and bring him peace. He began to run, scarcely noticing the roughness of the going, towards the place a little distant from the village, where they had put his brother.

The ground had still its freshly dug appearance. There had been no rain to beat it flat or mellow the harsh, raw redness that was like a wound on the earth's face. Here, under this red disturbance a few feet long, with a rough stone to mark his head, lay Simpi.

He crouched down close beside the grave and slowly, so slowly that he could never afterwards remember just when he had grown aware of it, something came to him. First it was simply an easing of his distress, then peace, then strength, then a demand. Something was wanted of him. Something was urging him on to effort, telling him that the time for mourning and weakness was past and that he must rise up and go forward with courage. That he was no longer a youth but a man on whose shoulders lay the weight of chieftainship, to whom the people would look for leadership and guidance. This thing, this presence, was like the force of

great water carrying him along with it. He felt no fear, only a sort of listening wonder as though, at any minute now, the one who spoke to his mind would utter the words aloud and he would hear the voice of Simpi; quiet and restrained, full of the confidence of simplicity as it had been in life.

But, no sound broke the stillness until, long afterwards, the sounds of evening came drifting down from the village above. The lowing of cattle, the whistling of the herds, the cry of a night bird as it winged its way, solitary, across the pale arc of the sky.

How long he had remained beside the grave he did not know, but darkness was close at hand when at last he stumbled to his feet. Standing there, looking down upon the grave, he spoke to his brother in a quiet voice.

'This,' he said, 'should have been buried with you. It has no more power than the rest of the poor body which lies beneath this earth,' and stooping, he scratched a hole in the grave and buried the medicine horn. 'I myself,' he went on, 'shall be the horn filled with the power of the memory of what you were in life. I, who knew your mind so that I heard your words before you spoke them, shall come to you when I am troubled or afraid. I shall ask myself, what would Simpi have done? What would Simpi have said? I shall not usurp your place as chief, my brother. My people, though they may not know it, will be led by Simpi. I remember how once, when my father sent for

the witch doctor to arrest a hail storm, you laughed. "Do you not believe in the witch doctor?" I asked you, and you replied: "When I see the sun rise in the west and set in the east; when the rain falls and leaves the earth dry; when the wind blows and the grass is still, I shall believe in the witch doctor." Our people will never again know the shame and fear of a *liretla*. And my son, who will be your son, whose name shall be Simpi, will lead them still further from these things of darkness, long after I have come to join you here. Peace, my brother. Strengthen me with your strength. I shall have need of it.'

He began to walk back slowly towards the village. It was not fear or apprehension which caused him to prolong the time before he must face his people, but rather a reluctance to part with his experience beside his brother's grave. The wonder of it hung about him still giving him courage and resolution to face his coming ordeal.

He paused for a moment and looked about him. All at once he realised that the veil of strangeness had been drawn aside. The shape of his village under the first stars was as he had always known it, the dark outline of the huts and kraals, the rock on which he had paid court to Mamolai, the dark plumes of the aloe poles. His thoughts went back to the previous night at the police camp when he had remained awake to watch the stars in a sudden hunger for the awareness that was life. He had been so sure then that death was

very near. Yet here, after all, was another night, and he had come home. He had never been taught to pray, either with his lips or in his mind, but now, in his heart, he felt a prayer take shape—thankfulness for his deliverance, supplication that he might be worthy of it.

How well he knew the outline of the mountains that confronted him. Not a dip, not a ridge, not a gully but was deeply etched into his mind. How good it was to see it now—comforting and reassuring as the features of a familiar face.

Suddenly, he was a boy again, happy and carefree, bringing home his flock along the well-trodden pathway. He could feel the earth under his bare feet, could smell the sweet, sickly scent of the sheep's wool. And then, as if the boy were sending out a message to his lost self, calling a greeting to the solitary man on the hillside, he heard the sweet notes of a *lesiba*—Eea-ooa, eea-ooa—and slowly, for the first time for many months, a smile formed on his lips and spread through his being.

## CHAPTER XXIII

The men had returned. They sat about their fires, silent and dejected, tired after the long, fruitless ride from Maseru, dispirited at the loss of their chief. Their mood was ready to fasten onto a victim, onto someone whom they could blame for the whole sad affair. And suddenly, coming into the orbit of the firelight, there was Lepotane. They looked at him with sullen, hostile faces.

‘I greet you,’ he said.

They nodded and looked away, drawing on their pipes, gazing into the firelight.

‘Gather together,’ Lepotane said, ‘I must speak to you.’

The authority in his voice surprised them. They looked at one another uncertainly. And because he stood there calmly, waiting for them to obey, they were disconcerted, each waiting for the other to make the first move.

‘Come over here,’ Lepotane said and walked towards the hut which had been his father’s.

His assurance, his sudden transition from youth to manhood, had its effect. They rose and followed him, albeit reluctantly.

When they had gathered outside the hut he told them to sit down. Siloane had made a fire there but,



when she saw the men approaching, she withdrew, modest, self-effacing, agog with curiosity.

Lepotane remained standing. The firelight leaped upon his tall, thin figure, upon his face, upon the bright pattern of his blanket.

The men stirred uneasily. Who was this man who looked at them with the eyes of a stranger and spoke with the ring of authority in his voice? Could this indeed be the youth, Lepotane, a good enough fellow, kindly but weak with the heart of a woman?

Lepotane spoke.

‘My uncles and men of my father, I greet you. You have come from the court. You know what took place there. Though it was not my wish, as my father’s son and according to the laws of our people, I am your chief. It has been said that I spoke the truth in order that I might go free. It is a lie. If any man doubts that it is a lie, let him depart now. Let him turn the door of his hut and attach himself and his loyalty to some other chief. No man shall serve me who believes this lie. Even if he seeks to hide his belief in his heart, fearing that he may lose his lands I shall sense the taint of it before a day has passed and order him to be gone. Therefore, think well before you make your choice. This village has seen much evil. The price it has paid has been high. Why I have not been made to share in the penalty, how I come to be here, I do not know. This case has taught me many things but, above all, I have learnt how deep and how wide and

how dark are the things I do not know—and how dangerous it can be to stand in such darkness, thinking oneself secure. But I am here, and here I shall remain. I shall take up the chieftainship where it was wrested from my brother who alone is guiltless of the evil that was done here. Some may say that he was a stock thief and deserved the hard fate which befell him. But I know, and you know, that, to Simpi, stock-theft was a game—a sport—to be played boldly and with danger only to himself. He never raised his hand against a herd, he never left anyone the worse by a scratch for his raids upon their stock-pens, nor stole from those who could ill afford to lose or whose own hands were clean of stock-theft. Nor was he one to cry when his own sheep were missing. He would have made you a fine chief. And what he would have been, that I shall strive to be, following always where he would have led. I know his will, for I am his other self. Simpi held no belief in witchcraft. I too am of his mind. I shall set my face against all dark practices of which *liretla* is the worst. Under me, no man shall have to choose again between obedience and murder. I shall strive to bring you peace, to see that you do not lack for bread, nor blanket, nor shelter from the cold.

‘I have spoken of my ignorance and how it led me into something which I would never have chosen of my own free will. That too I shall strive to overcome. I must have learning. Enough to understand the law under which we live and something too of the world

beyond our mountains which has given form to our laws. I shall not be too proud to ask for instruction, nor to receive it eagerly and industriously like a good child when it first goes to school.

‘And, in return, I shall expect something from you too. Industry, decent and lawful living, and loyalty to myself and to all those things which we know, in our hearts, to be right. I shall look to you to see that the shame of this village shall be forgotten, wiped out by the good life that is to come, that men will speak of it again with confidence and respect.’

He stopped speaking and, entering Phiri’s hut, returned with the short, thick club ornamented with bindings of brass and copper wire, which had been his father’s. Holding it aloft he said: ‘Let him who challenges my authority pick up my club.’

Then, with a whirling motion, he flung the club above the heads of the seated men. It spun through the air with a whipping, circular movement as the shaft revolved about the heavy head, catching the gleam of the firelight as it went. It struck the earth with a thud and bumped to a halt.

The night was very still. Not a man moved. Then, slowly, he walked himself to retrieve his club. The men parted to make way for him but they remained seated until he returned.

Then old Paliso rose to his feet and lifted his arms above his head in the traditional gesture of submission and salutation.

*Morena*—Chief,' he said.

At once the others followed his lead and the night rang to the deep cadence of their voices:

*'Morena—Morena.'*